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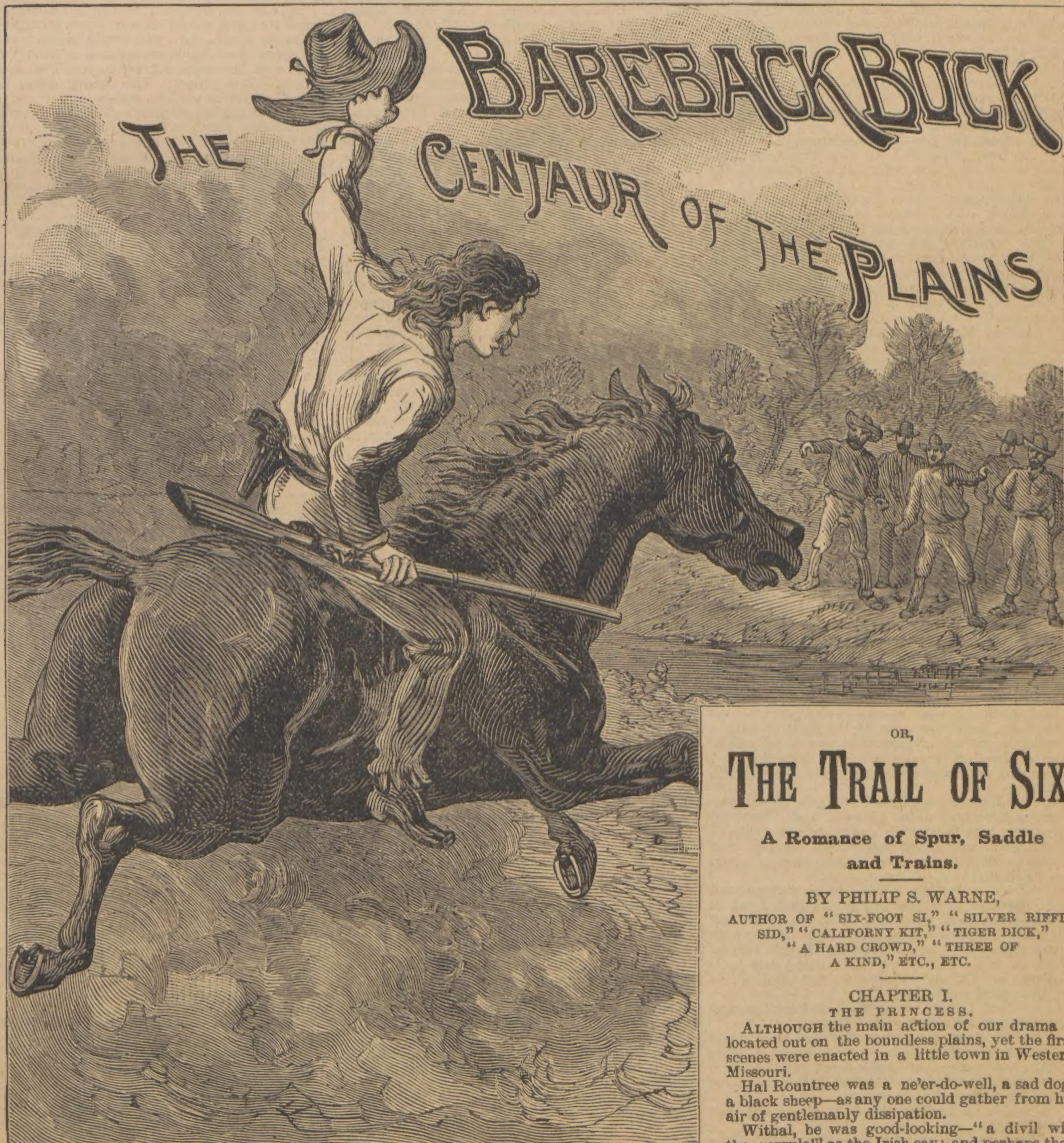
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OR, THE TRAIL OF SIX.

A Romance of Spur, Saddle
and Trains.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,
AUTHOR OF "SIX-FOOT SI," "SILVER RIFFLE
SID," "CALIFORNIA KIT," "TIGER DICK,"
"A HARD CROWD," "THREE OF
A KIND," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE PRINCESS.

ALTHOUGH the main action of our drama is located out on the boundless plains, yet the first scenes were enacted in a little town in Western Missouri.

Hal Rountree was a ne'er-do-well, a sad dog, a black sheep—as any one could gather from his air of gentlemanly dissipation.

Withal, he was good-looking—"a devil wid the gerruls!" as the Irish say; and perhaps that had helped to spoil him.

"It is not surprising, then, that there should

"BAR'BACK BUCK." WENT UP THE CRY. "BOYS, HE'S AS WHITE AS DEATH!
SOMETHIN'S WRONG, AS SURE AS SHOOTIN'!"

be frequent occasion to "excuse his French," when the stage floundered through an unusually deep mudhole—the more so since he found himself in the State of Missouri much against his will, having left his heart on the Atlantic seaboard, where divers and sundry ladies of high and low degree were sighing over his departure.

"What can Jim find in this God-forsaken wilderness, I'd like to know?" he muttered, between an imprecation on the head of the brother who had dragged him from his gay life in the eastern metropolis, and a comprehensive execration of all the territory lying west of the Mississippi.

"And if it is to his taste, why lug me into it too? To grow up with the country, I suppose—under his eye! A sweet time in prospect, upon my soul! Confound him! he probably thinks it will be cheaper keeping me out of the poor-house where temptations are not so abundant. I had a great mind to try one more whack at Billy Mantel's bank before going into leading-strings, and I'm blessed if I don't wish I had done it, now. But if Billy had clawed me, I should have been stranded high and dry. His Honor would have washed his hands of me, and left our mother's darling to fake or famish.

"Well, here I am, and I wish him joy of me! If he don't conclude before he's done that distance lends enchantment to the view, I lose my guess."

As everybody said of the brother at whose bidding Hal had sacrificed the light and joy of his life, what Jim Rountree didn't know about the quirks and turns of the law would make a mighty small book, and it was to an unscrupulous use of this knowledge that he owed his position.

As a rising young attorney, he had sought the hand of beautiful Beth, the eldest daughter of Squire Crawford, only to be refused, as he said, for a mere nobody—one of the hands on her father's farm.

But years had gone by. Judge Rountree now lived in the Crawford homestead, its former owner having died in poverty, of a broken heart.

Beth was away in the Western wilds, in quest of her lover, who had all this time been playing a losing game with fickle fortune in the mines.

Finally, pretty Rose, the pet and plaything of the family—the Princess, as they affectionately called her, because of her fairy-like loveliness—Rose Crawford and her two sturdy brothers, lifted again to comparative comfort by an unexpected bequest, were the wards of a guardian appointed by the very man who had ruined their father by what is leniently called "sharp practice."

Finding his brother engaged at court, and being in no particular hurry to see him, the traveler made a toilet at which the flannel-shirted and jack-booted natives were likely to stare, and went out to reconnoiter the village.

A brooklet, meandering away among trees that almost interlocked their boughs from the opposite banks, appealed to the artistic instincts of the man who found only material for execration in the unlovely houses and still less inviting door-yards, and he turned into the pathway that ran along the stream, past the grist-mill, away to he knew not what.

After perhaps half a mile of idle loitering, he suddenly stopped dead still, and bending forward in the earnestness of his gaze, muttered below his breath:

"By Jove!"

What he saw was a young girl, in the first bloom of budding womanhood.

Her merry laughter first caught his ear, followed by the barking of a huge Newfoundland dog that leaped about her, trying to get at a stick which she held as high as she could reach above her head.

Her dress was tasteful, though simple; but Hal Rountree, who knew a pretty girl when he saw one, had eyes only for her flowing hair, a wind-blown veil of gossamer, almost as yellow as a sheaf of ripe wheat; for her animated features, and for the willowy grace of her girlish figure.

"By Jove!" he aspirated, "that's worth coming a thousand miles to see! And I've been cursing my luck with every breath since I left those painted and powdered Jezebels of the East! Well, a man never knows when the gods are kindest!

"She's a darling, a bud—sweet sixteen and the queen of love! Of course her little head is full of romantic nonsense. Yes, yes, that's my game! If I had a gun, I'd let it go off through the brim of my hat. What can I do? Inspire me, oh, little god of love! If I could only half-drown myself, and let her save me! But in this confounded duck-pond—"

At that instant he got his inspiration, and acted on it without a second thought.

He stood on the verge of a clay bank, some four or five feet high, which formed a little bay, not more than ankle-deep, with a firm gravelly bottom, by points that jutted out above and below into deeper water.

Just here a tree stretched its limbs out over the stream.

Throwing his weight upon the edge of the bank, he crumbled some of it into the water, so

that it would look as if it had caved beneath his unwary tread, and then glanced back at the girl.

She threw the stick—a not particularly-graceful act in even the most charming of the sex—over hand, of course, and jumping up, as we have seen our own, or somebody's else sisters do.

But all was redeemed by the blithe glee with which she clapped her hands and laughed at the scampering dog.

Her eyes followed him straight toward the spot where Hal stood, and she espied the stranger, in the act of falling, clutching a limb as he went down out of sight with a cry of dismay.

For an instant she stood breathless, then, calling the dog, ran to the spot.

She saw a young gentleman, as handsome as a fairy prince, standing on tiptoe, ankle-deep in the water, gazing dubiously at the clay bank.

Beyond the wetting of his boots, his toilet—the most elegant she had ever seen—had sustained not the slightest fleck or flaw.

"My dear young lady," he said, lifting his hat with a smile of blended annoyance and amusement, "I owe you a thousand apologies, if I have startled you by my awkwardness; but it was easier to fall in here than it promises to be to get cleverly out again. You see that I am between the deep sea and the d— Ahem!"

His habit of *repartee* with the "dizzy dears" of his Eastern acquaintance came near betraying him into a speech that would shock this "bud," but recovering himself quickly, he went on:

"Don't let your dog come down here, please! He's a noble fellow, and under other circumstances I should appreciate his evidently good intentions, but this is one of those situations in which even misery doesn't love company."

"Nero! Here, sir!" cried the girl, seizing the dog by the collar, as he passed her, seeking some place to enter the water without leaping from the bank. "Lie down, sir! Charge! Charge!"

How prettily she did it, menacing the brute, bigger than herself, with a hand like a rose-leaf.

But why follow back and forth the shuttlecock of polite phrases which ended in her bending down a tree limb to him, and his swinging himself up on the bank with a grace that won her admiration?

Suffice it to say that, in a pretty maidenly way, she invited him to the house the chimneys of which were just visible through the tree-tops, warning him of the danger of taking cold, and promising for her brother the loan of a pair of dry boots.

But he made light of the matter, in a speech that, without startling her with a pointed compliment, let her see that so charming an adventure left him with no thought of discomfort.

He chatted with her ten or fifteen minutes, with no allusion to her or himself, but showing an artist's enthusiastic admiration of all around.

When he had bowed himself off, she knew not even his name, which gave her something to speculate about, and so served to keep him in mind.

Was he an artist? Would he return there to sketch?

She knew only that he was from the East, and, if his protestations might be believed, felt that his life had been wasted, in that he had so long been a stranger to the rare delights of this wonderful new country.

Following his retreating figure with her eyes till it disappeared among the trees, she was startled by a step close behind her, and turned to face an overgrown hobbledohoy who regarded her with a grin of gawky admiration.

He had never shaved, and his face was covered with a fuzzy down that made him look more of an imbecile than he really was.

The girl's eyes were very bright, and there was a soft flush in her cheeks, which deepened to scarlet, as, with a disdainful toss of her head she called to her dog, and ran away toward the house.

The person whom she left in possession of the field stared after her with mouth agape, till there was nothing to grin at but the trees that hid her from view, and then, his face clouding with dislike and suspicion, he turned and followed Hal Rountree until he saw him enter his brother's house.

Not far from midnight he was crouching beneath an open window there, listening to the concocting of a plot that was destined to lead to events far beyond the expectations of the plotters.

CHAPTER II.

THE PLOTTERS.

THE brothers sat on opposite sides of a table, Hal lounging indolently in his chair, blowing wreaths of smoke toward the ceiling; the judge regarding his nonchalant guest with a gathering frown of disapproval.

The hour was so late that neither guessed of the eavesdropper waiting to drink in their incautious words.

"Hal," began the judge, "when do you propose to begin to redeem yourself?"

"Eh?" ejaculated Hal, glancing askance through the blue curls of smoke from the cigar he held gracefully between his taper fingers.

"Is it as a protested note of hand, or as a miserable sinner, that you think I need redemption?"

"Joking aside," insisted the judge, "do you suppose you can go on in this way forever?"

"Heaven forbid!" groaned Hal, with a slight yawn.

"You are a discredit to yourself and to me!" pursued the judge, with increasing warmth.

"And to all belonging to me!" assented Hal, placidly.

"I," said the judge, with unconsciously a touch of the "spread-eagle" that distinguished him as a stump-speaker—"I began on nothing, and I am here!"

"I," responded Hal, in nowise abashed by this lofty reproof, "began on nothing, and I am here too!"

"With a difference!" corrected the judge, severely.

"Yes," assented Hal, blandly. "I haven't your conscience!"

There is a slang expression which describes how the judge acknowledged defeat in this clashing of wits. He "came off the perch."

"Hal," he resumed, in his business tone, "how should you like a hundred thousand dollars?"

"As a starter? Fair! fair!" replied Hal, with a satirical affectation of indifference.

"And an assured position in society?"

At that Hal made a little wry face, shrugged his shoulders, and answered, modestly:

"I don't deserve it!"

"And, finally, a wife?"

"A—a what?"

Hal gasped, and affected to collapse, sinking in his chair the picture of utter dejection.

"Spare me, my good brother! spare me! I know that you would shower blessings upon my graceless head—that you would share with me the starch and buckram of respectability that lends such becoming dignity to your own august person. But reflect! The dainty dears have been the bane of my life, and—"

"A word, I beg of you!"—lifting a languidly deprecating hand, to arrest the angry retort on his brother's lips. "The thought of coming to this dismal hole—pardon me!—this silvan retreat in which you have seen fit to sequester yourself, was a nightmare to me. But I yielded to your peremptory commands—on pain of having my pocket-money cut off!"

"Well, I was here; and roaming through this Eden, I came upon an Eve who reconciled me to my exile. But now—ah, now! Wealth, respectability, and a wife!"

"But I'll tell you what I'll do, brother Jim. Give me two weeks of freedom for the last and sweetest of all flirtations; and then, if this affliction with which you are about to crush my young spirits isn't too hideously ugly, I'll—I'll—well, I'll think of it."

"Why, confound you, it isn't an ogress that I have picked out for you!"

"A hundred thousand don't go begging for nothing," insisted Hal, shaking his head, unconvinced. "She must be something awful!"

"Rose Crawford," cried the judge—

"Crawford? Crawford?" interrupted his brother reflectively. "Let me see! That name seems familiar. Ah! You don't mean to say that it is the daughter of the fellow you sharpened out of this—"

"It doesn't matter whose daughter she is!"

"And then," pursued Hal, still groping among memories, "I seem to recall the echo of a rumor that you was sweet on her yourself—before Mrs. Rountree's time, of course! How long ago was it? Five—"

"The girl was in short dresses five years ago!" cried the judge, impatiently—"yes, two years ago!"

"Oh! You were taking her out of the cradle, to raise by hand? You were always longheaded, Jim."

"Confound your impudence! I have a mind to throw you out of the house! Is there never more than one girl in a family?"

"Beg pardon! That ought to have occurred to me. Your idea, then, is that we take them in rotation, till we secure one of them? Had the other a sweet bait too? Of course—this place."

Hal's cool insolence was so persistent that the judge's annoyance evaporated in a laugh.

"You don't deserve that I should bother my head about you," he said. "Here I am figuring to secure you the prettiest girl in the State of Missouri—or in any other State, for that matter—and you—"

"Hold on!" cried Hal, suddenly starting up from his lazy posture, and straightening round so as to face his brother across the table.

"There can't be two really pretty girls in such an out-of-the-way hole as this—certainly not another to surpass her."

"Does your candidate for matrimony live in a farm-house, on the left bank of the brook about a quarter of a mile—perhaps half—below the mill-dam? But no! that's too good—"

"Of course she does."

Hal settled back into his old easy posture, leaning his head on the back of his chair so as to blow a wreath of smoke toward the ceiling, and closing his eyes, murmured, in a sort of ecstasy:

"That angel!—and a hundred thousand!"
 "Do you know her already?" cried the judge.
 "You haven't been in the place twelve hours!"
 "She is my Eve!" murmured Hal.
 "But you cannot flirt with her. She is a lady, and a mighty scrupulous one, too."
 "She is human, and I understand the art."
 "You can't make me believe—"

"That she is approachable as one of your village boors would go about it? Of course not. If she were, where would be the fun of angling? Nevertheless, I have already enjoyed an informal interview with her, in every way enchanting."

"You are chaffing me! Of course you went to the house, and she answered politely the queries of a stranger."

"On the contrary, I have been no nearer the house than the banks of the stream. No living creature, save her own sweet self, a huge dog she had with her, and the birds, knew of our meeting; yet I chatted with her just long enough not to spoil a pleasant impression."

"How did you manage it?"

In his bantering way Hal described his meeting with Rose, concluding:

"Now if I were to go there to-morrow, there would be no chance of seeing her. Perhaps not the day after. But on the day following that, you may depend that we should meet—by chance, the usual way! And some touch about her toilet would betray that she had stood before her mirror longer than usual."

"You're a conceited puppy!" cried the judge.

"I am a knowing dog," amended Hal. "I've been there before."

Then he asked:

"Has she brothers?"

"Two."

"Of what age?"

"One about seventeen, and other perhaps fourteen."

"And she?"

"Is a twin with the elder."

"I should like to lay a wager with you."

"On what?"

"That the next time I see her, she will be accompanied by her brother—the younger one."

"Then you intend to see her again? And you will take her?"

"If I can get her."

"My scheme—"

"I will listen to your scheme when my own is a little further advanced. My chance will be better if you don't meddle."

"At any rate, you will not object to hearing about the money. The girl is joint heir to the hoardings of a miserly old West-Pennsylvania farmer, and to the patch of rocky land where he has been working his soul-case out these forty years or more."

"The elder sister, Elizabeth, has already got her share of the ready money, and gone West in search of a worthless fellow who took her fancy years ago—"

"I condole with you!" broke in Hal, with a laugh.

"The other three are under a guardian of my appointment—"

"A creature of yours, I'll be bound!"

"When I crack the whip— But, never mind that. The money made no great showing, divided among four, but it was supposed that the farm would sell for enough more to bring them up comfortably, with perhaps a little start when they come of age. However, I happen to know that that stony patch is worth in the neighborhood of half a million."

"Half a million!"

"Oil. That's the magic word."

"And of this half-million, Miss Rose will inherit a hundred and twenty-five thousand? The odd thousands are to go to you, I suppose, as your fee for negotiating my marriage. You are modest in your demands—no doubt out of filial attachment."

Ignoring his brother's sneer, the judge said, coolly:

"The inheritance is divided so that the elder girl, being already of age, gets the most of the ready money, while the younger will get the larger percentage of the property. Her share will be in the neighborhood of two hundred thousand."

"And you proposed to divide even with me. Ah! there I recognize your wonted generosity."

Still unmoved by this sarcasm, the judge kept on:

"Finally, the title to the place is in litigation."

"Eh?" cried Hal, but with a total absence of resentment in his voice which showed how little surprised he was at any depth of rascality in his brother. "And do you propose to work on so shaky a basis? But I forget! Of course, if the scheme comes to nothing, it will be only I that is sacrificed."

"And do you suppose—"

"Oh, don't borrow trouble," interrupted Hal, serenely. "I think I shall fancy the girl, anyway: so I will go ahead and take the chances."

"But I am not of your hit-or-miss style. The litigation is of my own making—for a purpose."

"Well, I swear! But, then, I might have guessed—"

"Never mind what you might have guessed. It is enough that, when I have carried my point here, the case will be dropped, having the appearance of a compromise."

"And how did you propose to work it here? Really, the plot is so deep that it begins to be interesting."

Briefly, and as coolly as if it were an ordinary piece of business, the judge stated his plan—which we shall presently see carried into execution.

Then his cigar being out, Hal proposed that they go to bed.

Little did they dream of the eavesdropper who crept away from under the window, chuckling and muttering to himself.

But, as the poet tells us:

"The best-laid plans o' mice an' men gang aft a-glee!"

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST MOVE IN THE GAME.

"An' what's the matter with our 'Bijah, I want to know?"

It was an angry woman who made this demand, and she did it so fiercely that she looked the regular old ogress she was.

Mrs. Losy had never been a belle, and now, as she stood with her arms akimbo and her vixenish face white with wrath, she was enough to make the timid girl shrink in terror of some bodily harm.

But Rose Crawford was so indignant at the outrage that had just been put upon her, that she replied with spirit:

"Matter with him? Why, he's a fool! I should think that was matter enough."

"A fool! a fool!" screamed the offended mother, stamping her foot. "Lish Losy, do you hear that?"

She turned to her husband, who stood stolidly with his hands in his pockets, trying to work a shred of gristle from between his teeth with his tongue.

'Bijah stood just behind "the author of his being," shock-headed and with his lantern jaws looking like the fuzzy body of a very young gosling.

Hat in hand—for he had just been called into the house by his mother to take part in the scene we are about to describe—he stood looking decidedly sheepish, and somewhat timid, having taken refuge behind his father when the situation began to look "squally."

However, he found courage to regard Rose with the grin of admiration that always exasperated her.

Seeing that her husband was thinking the situation over more leisurely than consisted with her frame of mind, Mrs. Losy rallied him at a pitch of voice that sounded like the filing of a saw.

"Lish Losy, be you asleep? Hain't you got nothin' to say to the impudence o' this ongrateful hussy? Here we've took her an' them two strappin' boys in, an' done for 'em as if they was our own; an' what do we get for it? Sass from her ladyship that 'ud try a saint; an' you stand in there like the rock of ages, an' never a whimper out o' ye!"

"My way," replied Mr. Losy, slowly, "is a way what ain't got so much jaw to it."

He looked about, as if in quest of something which his eye might chance upon almost anywhere, and asked:

"Whar's them papers, Mirandy?"

"What papers?" snapped his wife.

"Them guarden papers what Jedge Rountree give us."

"They're under the clock. You know that as well as I do. You put 'em there yerself."

With a slow, clamping step, as if each foot were a loaded stone-boat, Mr. Losy crossed the room, and after considerable fumbling, took down from the clock shelf a long and thick envelope, with a legal look about it.

Seating himself deliberately, and adjusting on the end of his nose a pair of heavy, silver-bowed spectacles, he took out the inclosure, which proved to be a blank form, filled in with writing and having a great red seal in one corner, and examined it as if to assure himself that it was what he sought.

Rose watched this proceeding with bated breath and dilating eyes.

Mrs. Losy waited with malicious triumph, as if the rebel was now to be crushed.

'Bijah stared with his mouth hanging open, awed by this portentous ceremony.

Mr. Losy presently looked up over his spectacles, and fixed his eyes sternly on the face of the shrinking girl.

"Rosalind Crawford," he demanded, with the deliberation of a judge addressing the prisoner at the bar, "be we your gardeens, or bain't we your gardeens? That's what I want to know!"

"I suppose so," admitted the girl tremulously.

"But that isn't saying—"

"Never you mind what that's a-sayin'!" interrupted Mr. Losy, with the peremptoriness with which he had seen a witness browbeaten. "Leave me alone to say all you're wantin' to hear, before I git through."

"Secondly!—Rosalind Crawford, be these here the dockyments what Jedge Rountree give

us, or be they some trasht wha I've picked out o' the rag-bag?"

"They don't give you any right to make me—"

"We'll see what they give us a right to do. I reckon Jim Rountree knowed what he was about when he drawered 'em up, an' I do 'low ef it don't become me to say it, as Lish Losy ain't nobody's fool!"

"But we've got this fur. These here air the dockyments what Lish Losy an' Mirandy, his wife, the gardeens of Rosalind Crawford, darter of ole Squire Crawford, all signed an' sealed."

"Now let's see what this here says."

He began to read, stumbling over the words worse than one of his plows in ungrubbed soil, till he got all tangled up among the saids and aforesaid.

Then, giving over his hopeless task, he concluded:

"'Twon't do no good to read that there all over jest now. You kin take yer time to it ef you find it interestin'."

"This here's enough fur you, an' enough fur me. Mirandy an' me is your gardeens, all accordin' to law, an' we've got Jedge Rountree to back us; an' ef you kin git away with Jim Rountree, you'll be smarter'n your daddy was before ye."

"But you can't make me live with that son of yours!" cried Rose, with a quivering voice.

"I'd kill myself first!"

"Nobody don't die till their time comes," replied Mr. Losy, "an' I'd give a policy on you cheaper'n most."

Then turning to his hopeful son and heir, he asked:

"'Bijah Losy, be you 'lowin' to marry this hyere young woman?"

'Bijah grinned at Rose, and bobbed his head to his father.

"An' you'll take her, to have an' to hold, through sickness an' through health? An' you agree to work stiddy on the farm fur her keep, an' fur the keep of her children, till the ole man galls in the harness, an' turns the hull thing over to you?"

'Bijah grinned and bobbed again.

Rose shuddered with terror and disgust.

Mrs. Losy shook her head and smiled with malicious triumph.

"Well," said Losy, deliberately proceeding to fold up the papers, "I reckon that's about all there is to it."

"I'll tell Jedge Rountree!" cried Rose, in despair, "and see if you can do just as you've a mind to with me!"

"You'll have a good chance this very afternoon," said her guardian, placidly. "He'll be here lookin' after that piece o' plowed land as the widder Sylvester has been lettin' go to the dogs this five year. But I reckon he'll tell you as we're your gardeens."

And Mrs. Losy made her blood run cold by saying:—

"I'll have you ready in a week! We'll see what you'll make by your sass!"

Sure enough, Jedge Rountree made his appearance that afternoon, and had a long interview with Lish Losy, during which the plowed land referred to underwent inspection.

Rose watched for him as he was about to leave the place, and, with a sinking heart, made her appeal.

She felt all the more fearful of the result, that no impediment was thrown in her way by her guardians.

Jedge Rountree listened to her with a smile of benevolent indulgence.

"So they're talking of marrying you, are they?" he said, taking her by the chin to lift her blushing face to his gaze. "Well! well! how time passes, to be sure! Why, I can't get it into my head that you are anything but a little girl. Have you begun to think about beaux already? And it's 'Bijah, is it? Well, he'll be a lucky fellow if he gets you."

"But you don't understand!" she cried, a cold chill running through her at this reception of her complaint. "I hate him! I loathe the very ground he treads on! I can't tell you—"

"Tut! tut! tut!" he interrupted, lifting his eyebrows in affected astonishment. "What's the matter with 'Bijah? There isn't an honest fellow in the village, nor a steadier one."

The girl stepped back, and looked at him panting.

"I suppose this has the approval of your guardians," he went on to say. "And, my dear, take the word of a man who has seen a great deal of the world—they know what is for your good."

He was about to turn away, as if the matter was disposed of, but, in desperation, she seized hold of his arm, and detained him.

"Wait! wait!" she panted. "They can't make me live with him, can they, if I don't want to?"

"You are too young to know what you want—certainly what is best for you," answered the judge, with a fatherly air. "The law has appointed these people over you as guardians, and I dare say that they will care for your true interests."

In despair she was about to let him go, as he

turned away again; but he thought better of it, and came back to say:

"My child, there is something that you perhaps ought to know. It was supposed that your grandfather's land would sell for enough to support you and your brothers till you came of age; but it now appears that he had not a clear title, and you probably will never get anything more out of it."

"The ready money we received has nearly all been used in your support so far, and you will soon owe everything to the kindness of Mr. and Mrs. Losy. They say that they are very fond of you, and are willing to do the best they can for you, even without any return. As their daughter-in-law, you would of course have some claim upon them. But in any event, I hope you will not repel their kindness with ingratitude."

"But we will write to Beth!" panted the trembling girl. "She will not let us be dependent upon anybody."

Judge Rountree smiled indulgently, but shook his head.

"Your noble sister has won the admiration of every one by her devotion to you," he said. "But, knowing the errand she is now on, I think you will hardly have the heart to ask her to still further sacrifice her own happiness to you. Besides, she has as little money as you have. If she finds the man of whom she is in search, he will probably not bargain to support all of her family; and if she fails to find him, she will have her own living to make—not an easy thing in that wild country, I fancy."

Now he really went, and the girl stood speechless.

"Well!" cried an unmistakable voice at her elbow, "much you made out o' Judge Rountree! Didn't he tell you as your gardeens knowed best what was good fur you, an' could do what they liked with ye?"

"You may kill me!" said Rose, turning to the malicious old woman, "but I'll never be anything to your son more than I am now!"

"You won't, eh?" screamed the vixen, seizing her by the wrist. "Come into the house this minute! An' you'll feast on bread an' water till you come to my way o' thinkin'!"

The unhappy girl was dragged into the house, and put under lock and key.

However, her brothers, Cass and Mart, were allowed to see her, and the three discussed the matter at length.

But they were all equally ignorant of their rights before the law, and persuaded of the unlimited power of Judge Rountree.

They remembered the bitterness with which their father had spoken of his helplessness against the intrigue of the judge, and how their mother, during the years of poverty that had added to the misery of her widowhood, had maintained that he had robbed them of their home in defiance of all law and justice.

The fact that he had appointed their guardians, made it look as if he had disposed of them as he pleased; and now if he sanctioned this thing, there was no use in looking to any one for help.

Cass could see nothing for it but to run away, but was at a loss how to carry out his scheme.

"One thing!" he said. "If we can't get off, I'll punch that loony so's he'll be too sick abed to stand up before any preacher!"

But Rose was frightened at the prospect of imprisonment as the result of such a breach of law and order.

It was Mart who broke a long, dismal silence with the suggestion:

"Say, sis! what's the reason we couldn't get that painter fellow to help us? He ain't a muff, like everybody in this village; and I reckon he wouldn't let Judge Rountree or any of the rest of them touch you. He likes you. I know he does, by the way he eyes you when you ain't looking."

This speech led to an embarrassing explanation from Miss Rose, in which her elder brother learned of her acquaintance with the agreeable stranger, while she discovered that he was no less a person than Judge Rountree's brother.

Hal Rountree had made good use of the two weeks that had intervened since his adventure in the mill-stream.

True to his prediction, he had seen Rose, generally, though not always, in the company of her younger brother.

Now Cass decided against him uncompromisingly.

"He's a Rountree. There ain't any good in him!"

Rose's face fell. Even before it had been suggested by Mart, she had thought of an appeal to this romantic friendship.

Two days of imprisonment followed, during which Mrs. Losy was as good as her word, keeping her victim literally on bread and water.

Cass and Mart managed—very craftily as they supposed, but really with the connivance of Mrs. Losy—to smuggle in to her some meat, and a piece of pie rather the worse for having been wrapped in a bit of newspaper and carried in Mart's pocket.

But all three were in despair of any way out of their trouble.

On the afternoon of the third day Rose was startled by the fall of several bits of gravel on

the floor of her prison, coming in through the open window.

She went and looked out, to find 'Bijah below, acting as if he were on the alert to elude the vigilance of some one, while he gave her a glimpse of a letter, which he quickly hid under his jacket again.

With a bent pin and a bit of thread, he intimated how it might be sent to her, at the same time indicating, by exaggerated pantomime, the danger of betrayal by his voice if he spoke.

Rose's first impulse was to close the window, and shut from her sight 'Bijah's unwelcome grin of admiration.

But then came a thought that set her heart to beating wildly.

'Bijah himself could not have written the letter to her; but if not he, who then?

In a twinkling she had acted on his suggestion, and fished up the missive, whatever it might prove to be.

CHAPTER IV.

A DESPERATE STRUGGLE.

It was a love-letter, written as such a man as Hal Rountree could write it, and now read by poor Rose with such a wild throbbing of the heart that she felt as if she must suffocate.

In the most impassioned terms he professed a love dating from the moment he had first seen her.

He told of the fear that had haunted him, lest she should discover who he was, and let her father's wrongs at the hands of his brother rise as a barrier between them.

But now he must reveal himself, pleading only that he viewed the past with shame, and that, if the blissful opportunity was afforded him, it would be the work of his life to make to her such atonement as was possible.

But, whether she could love him or not, he begged that she would allow him to save her from the unutterable fate that impended over her.

He said that it would be useless to appeal to Judge Rountree. He who could shield her with a word would not interfere, the more so if he discovered the interest his brother held in her.

What he was about to propose would frighten her by its abruptness, because their acquaintance had been so short.

But there was no time to lose. What was to be done must be done at once.

Anxious at not seeing her for the past three days, he had got hold of 'Bijah Losy, and easily drawn the whole scheme from him, which a casual remark on the part of his brother, the judge, had confirmed.

'Bijah was too much of a fool to realize the part he was expected to play, and he had run no risk in using him to get this word to her.

And now his proposal was that, if she loved him, she should fly with him, and make him the happiest man in all the wide world: if she could not be his, still let her give him the poor privilege of taking her and her brothers to a place of safety, till something could be done to dispossess Losy and his wife of their authority over her.

In the most florid language, he pictured the home he would make for his little bird-wife, as he called her.

This last part of his letter contained everything that was calculated to captivate the fancy of a young and inexperienced girl; and, if the truth must be told, it completely turned poor Rose's little head, at least for the time being.

If she did not really love him, she certainly thought she did, during the perusal of that first delicious love-letter.

What should she do?

On the one hand, it seemed almost a sacrilege to let any eyes but her own read the outpouring of a heart that was all aflame with love for her.

But Hal seemed to take it for granted that her brothers were to accompany her; and this, while it quieted fears that would otherwise have arisen, left nothing but that the letter should be shown to them.

Luckily Mart came into the room a few steps ahead of his brother, and, with hands shaking so that she could scarcely hold the letter, she gave it to him, asking him to give it to Cass when he entered.

Then she ran and bowed her head into her lap, throwing her apron over it, so as to hide her crimson face from view while the letter was being read.

Cass read it from beginning to end, in dead silence.

The suspense seemed to her interminable, and she held her breath to listen so intently that she heard his heavy breathing.

Then she was overcome with a fear she had never before known.

All in a moment her brother seemed to be transformed into a man, and a man whose anger was terrible.

She did not know when he concluded the letter, but she thought that he sat a long time after it perfectly still.

Presently he got up, and began to pace the room, still without a word to her.

Wondering what was in the letter, and impressed by the expression of his brother's face, Mart had crept to Rose's side.

He now put his arm about her, and convulsively she seized his hand under cover of her apron, and clung to it.

Presently Cass stopped in his restless walk, and asked, in a low, husky voice:

"Do you—do you—care for this—for him?"

Only an inarticulate murmur, a quivering protest, came from the depths of the apron.

"The sneaking thief!" growled Cass, between his set teeth, striking the table with his fist. "I'll fix him!"

At that the terrified girl threw her apron from her head, and extending her hands appealingly, murmured:

"Oh, Cass!"

He was standing near the window, with his clinched hand still resting upon her little dressing-table.

In it her letter was crumpled as if he held the heart of his enemy in his grasp.

Never had she seen such a bearing of his figure—such an expression on his face.

It was indeed as if ten years had come down upon him in that supreme moment.

With an abrupt change of feeling at sight of her tearful eyes, he went over to her, sat down beside her, and taking her by the wrist, looked searchingly into her face, the anger and hatred in his own giving place to troubled anxiety.

"Has he been making love to you?—the cowardly scoundrel!" he asked, beginning sadly, but ending with a suppressed burst of fury.

"Oh, no! no!" pleaded Rose, piteously.

"Don't be afraid to tell me," Cass went on.

"Do you—do you—love him?"

"Oh, I don't know! I don't know!" sobbed the girl. "He was very kind to me."

"Kind to you?"

The words passed his lips as if tipped with fire. He did not know how he tightened his grip on his sister's wrist.

"I will do whatever you say!" she promised, hurriedly.

"I would rather see you dead—dead!" repeated Cass, shaking before him his fist clinched upon the obnoxious letter, "than have you fall into the clutches of the saintliest Rountree of them all! And if this is their best, they're a bad lot!"

"Booby Losy may be a fool, but he isn't the lying, skulking hound to—"

But the words choked him, and he rose to his feet and began to pace the room again.

Mart said not a word, but he tightened his arm about his sister. Tears stood in his eyes, and his bloodless lips quivered with distress.

He felt that dangers were thickening around the sister he loved; and they three so helpless against the whole world.

He looked at Cass in wonder at the strength with which he had risen to the occasion; and the years seemed to increase between them. Yet, after all, he knew that it was but a boy against a man with whom even their father had failed to cope.

Cass suddenly came to a determination, as was indicated by the manner with which he thrust the letter into his pocket.

"I want to think this over," he said, "and to do it I want to be alone."

Then, by an effort, he composed his face so that even lynx-eyed Mrs. Losy should discover nothing, and went out, leaving Mart with their sister.

Having run the gantlet of that lady's malicious curiosity, he passed through the kitchen door only to see 'Bijah apparently on the watch for him.

The blood rushed to his head, and he was almost swept away with a mad impulse to do instant battle with this cause of all the trouble.

But prudent considerations prevailed. It would not do to expose himself to any curtailment of his freedom at this crisis. So, choking with rage, he went on.

Like a wild animal, the vaulted woods were his home.

All his young life, when free from the restraint of winter schooling, had been spent in them, with a fishing-rod while young, with a gun after he was old enough to be trusted with it.

There, alone, he had wrestled with his boyish troubles, and there he now went to plan this the most portentous struggle of his life.

He was followed thither by 'Bijah Losy, and at sight of him every thought but one was swept out of his mind by a surge of passion like the rush of the Mississippi through a crevasse.

"You grinning idiot!" he cried, tearing off his coat and throwing it on the ground. "You took that villain's letter to my sister. You're a heap bigger than I am, but I'm going to knock the head off of you if I can keep the life in my body long enough to do it!"

Under ordinary circumstances he would never have thought of fighting with 'Bijah, knowing well enough that Losy was much more than a match for him in size and strength; but now it was plain that he had fully resolved to die on the spot, or conquer by sheer endurance.

He cared nothing for the punishment he himself might receive. It might be his death drubbing. But if he could only retain consciousness and the power to wield his fists long enough, 'Bijah Losy should be laid up in bed for one while.

"Hold on, Cass!" urged 'Bijah. "You hain't no call to fight with me—"

"I'll show you what I have call to do!" roared Cass, gathering himself for a rush. "Look out for yourself!"

And he plunged forward like an avalanche. 'Bijah would have been borne to the ground, had he met the full force of this savage onset.

But, instead, he fought on the defensive, skipping aside with an agility that would not have been expected from his appearance.

"Let up, Cass!" he still urged, his voice indicating no anger. "You don't know what you're a-doin'. I tell you you're clean off. If you'll only listen—"

"I'll listen to you—after the doctor says you're out of danger!"

And Cass plunged forward again.

It was plain that there was no escaping the encounter. Mad with rage, conciliation was thrown away on Cass.

Not only this, but 'Bijah soon saw that if he continued to fight wholly on the defensive, in the hope of making Cass listen to explanation when he had him tired out, he would probably get a severe drubbing, even if he was not knocked out of time by his furious adversary.

After having been driven from pillar to post for some time, and having received one or two blows that would have stung most fellows into retaliation, he saw his chance.

Disgusted with his policy of keeping out of the way, Cass had shouted to him:

"Stand to the rack, you miserable coward!"

And as even this taunt did not seem to rouse 'Bijah's pugnacity, Cass was thrown somewhat off his guard.

When he least expected it, one of his rushes met with a new reception.

'Bijah planted a terrific right-hander square between his eyes!

His impetus was arrested as if he had thrown himself against a stone wall, and he stood dazed.

Then 'Bijah sprang in upon him, and clasped him about the body.

At the first grip Cass felt that he was a child in the grasp of a strong man.

It came upon him in a flash that he had never fully estimated 'Bijah. He had known that he was large and strong, but he had always thought him clumsy, and had associated the idea of cowardice and general inefficiency with his apparent weakness of intellect.

Now, with a sense of terror that was altogether new to him, he saw 'Bijah in a different light, and with it came the conviction that he was about to be conquered.

All his love for his sister came to reinforce his natural pride, infusing into his muscles the spasmodic energy of madness.

Setting his teeth with a suppressed howl like that of a wild beast, he clasped his enemy about the body and wrestled with him as he had never wrestled before.

But it was of no use. He was tripped and thrown, falling undermost.

But what if the breath was knocked out of his body by the concussion? The thought of poor Rose and her wrongs; the thought of being so frail a barrier in her defense that he was brushed aside even by this, the most despicable of her enemies—still filled his veins with liquid fire and drew tense his overstrained muscles.

He had scarcely touched the ground when he rolled 'Bijah over.

But 'Bijah kept up the motion, so that they turned clear over, bringing Cass again beneath.

Again over—clear over, as before; and Cass's heart began to fail him.

Under any other circumstances he would have been completely winded. But now he fought on, his teeth clinched desperately, his brain whirling; hope gone and only dogged endurance holding out.

But nature has her limit, and even poor Cass reached it at last. He lay upon his back gasping for breath, while he gazed up into his enemy's face with bloodshot eyes.

If in that moment he could have killed him, he would have done it without compunction.

How often do we have murder in our hearts! It is lucky for us all that our hands are stayed, when the brain is in a whirl with mad passion.

'Bijah, too, had had the severest struggle of his life, for quickness and dexterity are more formidable than mere strength; but he was not so completely exhausted as was Cass.

He reached round to his back with his right hand, and tore away Cass's relaxed arm, passing it to where he could grasp the wrist with his left hand, which was under Cass.

Then he fumbled at something that Cass could not see, even if he had not been so dazed as to scarcely know what was passing.

But when something closed upon his wrist, and he realized that it was a rope noose, and that he was to be bound, this crowning indignity stung him into renewed activity.

Now 'Bijah had his hands full. Cass squirmed like an eel. The struggle that ensued was fiercer than before, if possible. But in the end he was secured.

With his hands bound behind his back, 'Bijah lifted him and set him up against a tree.

Taking a seat opposite him, he said:

"Now we're goin' to talk sense!"

But, heedless of all save the fact that he was bound and helpless in the hands of the only one of Rose's enemies against whom he had hoped for even the meagerest success, Cass's stout heart broke at last, and he burst into tears.

CHAPTER V.

NOBODY'S FOOL.

"You'd better kill me while you have the chance!" panted Cass, choking with futile rage. "I'll murder you for this, if I ever get free!"

"No you won't," replied 'Bijah, himself glad of the chance to breathe freely.

"You'll see! If my name is Cass Crawford, I'll put a charge of buck-shot through you before we're many days older!"

"Before we're one day older," declared 'Bijah, "you an' me is goin' to be the best friends in the ole State o' Missouri."

"Untie my hands, and I'll do my best to ram every lying word down your throat!"

"Look a' hyere, Cass. You know as well as ye need to, that if I could tie you up like you be, I could 'a' polished you off a heap sight easier if I'd been a mind to."

"You ought to, you big lout!"

"Waal, if I didn't, it was because I didn't want to. I only give you one soaker, an' that was because I had to. You might 'a' made it too warm fur me, or at any rate I might 'a' had to hurt you worse, if I hadn't knocked you a mite groggy to begin with."

"Now what do you 'low I was so easy on you fur, when you was thirstin' fur my heart's blood?"

"How should I know what goes on in that thick head of yours?"

"Anyway, thar's enough in it to take in you an' them Rountrees, an' dad, an' mam, an' a lot more as has sot down 'Bijah Losy as a fool."

"But I'll tell ye why I tied ye up, if ye want to know. It's because ye can't be got to bark to nothin' no other way; an' I didn't want to lick you, but to talk sense to ye, as I said."

"I don't want to hear anything out of you!" insisted Cass, doggedly.

But his voice was lowered. He could not but be impressed by 'Bijah's manner, now that he stopped to think about it.

"To start on," said 'Bijah, sucking the blood from a scratch across the back of his hand, and regarding the wound intently as he spoke; not from any especial interest in it, but because he could proceed with less embarrassment so, "from 'way back they've sot me down as a simpleton, jest because I wa'n't as harnsome as some; an' thar's whar trouble begins."

"Them as wanted to use me, 'lowed as all they had to do was to whistle, an' I'd hark away. That's dad, an' mam—mostly mam, an' Jim Rountree, an' that gallantin' brother o' his'n. An' then thar's them as 'lowed as the ole man could hitch me to a breakin' plow, ef he'd only salt my fodder. That's you, an'—an' Rosy, an' sich."

"Waal, I don't keer fur most; but I reckon I'd die fur Rosy—I would, so help me!—before ary thing—"

So far he got, with the blood streaming into his face, and his voice shaken with feeling.

But for poor Cass to be bound and forced to listen to the plea of such a lover, was adding insult to injury.

He tugged at his bonds, as fruitlessly, however, as furiously, fairly roaring with rage.

"You infernal saphead!" he shouted, finding that his tongue was his only available weapon, "what right have you to die for her? What right have you to care for her? What right have you to so much as look at her? She wouldn't wipe her feet on you, or anybody like you!"

"I reckon," said 'Bijah, with a resigned sadness too deep for resentment, "ef it 'ud do her ary good, I'd lay down an' let her do it. But I hope she won't want to, when she knows what I'm 'lowin' to do fur her."

"Do for her? You shall never do anything for her! I tell you, 'Bijah Losy, I'll kill you before you shall put a finger on my sister! What right has Jim Rountree, or the law, or all the world, to give her to you? But you shall never have her, law or no law! I'll kill you if I have to bang the next minute!"

"Ye needn't take on so," said 'Bijah, in the same unmoved tone. "I know as well as you do that I ain't fitten fur Rosy."

"Then what do you mean by trying to marry her?"

"That's dad's doin's, and mam's—mostly mam's."

"But they can't do it unless you agree to it. They're not your guardians, and if they are your father and mother, you are of age, and can do as you please."

"That's so. An' bein's as it is so, do you 'low as I'd hurt Rosy's feelin's, an' make her cry her eyes out, all along o' me?"

"Ain't you doing it now? What's all the trouble about, I'd like to know, but just you?"

"That's dad an' mam's doin's—mostly mam's," repeated 'Bijah.

"Oh, you can't get out of it that way!" insisted Cass. "It's your doing!"

"Then you may count on this," declared 'Bijah, positively—"it never'll be carried out!"

"Eh?" ejaculated Cass, at a loss to know whether he had understood him aright.

"Look hyere, Cass," said 'Bijah, rising and approaching him, "it went ag'in' the grain fur me to tie you up that way, more'n you're 'lowin'! But I had to do it, to git you to hark to me without clawin' my eyes out. Howsom-ever, I told you as I was the best friend you had in the State o' Missouri, an' I reckon you're cooled off enough by this time to set quiet while I prove it to you. I don't want to keep you in that fix no longer'n I kin help, an' I'm goin' to loose that rope now."

Without more ado he freed Cass, the latter staring at him in astonishment.

"Now, jest set whar you be," he went on, "an' we'll straighten this thing out from the ground up. An' you needn't be afeard as 'Bijah Losy is the one to do ary thing, or let ary body else do ary thing ef he kin help it, to bring sor-er to Rosy."

When Cass Crawford had "blood in his eye" he was apt to cut a pretty broad swath all round him; but he bore no malice, and his generous nature was quick to perceive honest intention in another.

Nothing that 'Bijah could have done would have quieted him so quickly as this giving him his liberty.

It was a pledge of good faith at the outset, a proof that 'Bijah believed he could show that there was no real cause for hostility between them.

Of course, this must mean that he did not intend to be a party to the persecution of Rose.

"I don't see what you're getting through you," said Cass, "but if you mean that you ain't going to help them to kill my sister—for you know as well as you want to that you might as well kill her and be done with it—then I've used you pretty rough."

"We won't say nothin' about that," replied 'Bijah, manifesting the uneasiness of a generous nature at the prospect of having to receive a formal apology, "but I'll put it to ye straight, an' then you'll see that I ain't so bad as I look."

"Now, Cass, you ain't nobody's fool, an' I'll leave it to you, ef I was sich a noodle as they all let on, would I be gittin' the whip hand of ole Clark on them hosses, Skit an' Scat, as Billy Folger himself would give his eye-teeth ef he could swing his leg over the back of ary one of em?"

'Bijah referred to a transaction in which it was generally conceded that he had got the advantage of an old horse-trader noted in all that section for his shrewdness.

Instead of giving him credit, however, every one had dismissed the matter with a laugh and the adage:

"Fool's luck!"

Now there was a pathetic as well as a comical side to the earnestness with which 'Bijah urged his claims to be classed among men of sense instead of among fools.

But Cass was too deeply concerned with other considerations to notice either of these. Doubtful as to what this was intended to preface, he answered rather ungraciously:

"The horses are all right, I suppose."

"An' thar's Jin," continued 'Bijah, with increased earnestness, as if to win his case even in spite of Cass's want of sympathy. "The ole man 'lowed as she wouldn't be no good after the fall she got last winter, an' he like to bu'sted with larfin' when I gi'n him forty dollars fur her. But now he's jest cryin' fur to git her back fur a hundred; an' mam, she's done her level best fur to wheedle me out of her, or to jaw me out of her, 'lowin' as she had somethin' to say, bein' as she raised her from a colt. But when two hundred buys one o' her light heels—'lowin' as the rest has to go along of it, o' course—jest you wake me up with a belt in the ear!"

"I don't see what all this has to do with me," said Cass, growing still more ungracious. "I don't want your horses."

"Mebby you'll change yer mind about that before we git through," said 'Bijah, with a knowing wink and bob of his head.

"Not if I know myself!" cried Cass, with a sudden flaring up of the fierceness that had been temporarily allayed.

Whether more or less of a fool, did this fellow think that his success at horse-trading would be a recommendation as a husband for Rose?

Cass had already forgotten that 'Bijah had assured him that he had no such aspirations, whatever his regard for her might be.

"Waal," pursued 'Bijah, waiving the dispute as to Cass's future state of mind, "the ole man has laid himself out fur to keep my nose to the grindstun; but he's had to come down—it jest broke his heart to do it, but he had to come down with a leetle somethin' in the shape o' reg'lar wages, though he got more back a-workin' the hosses I owned."

"But what do I care for you or the old man?" demanded Cass. "What I want to know is—"

"You'll know it as soon as I git all the pins up fur to tell it to ye onderstandin'ly," was 'Bijah's calm assurance.

"I hope you'll get round to it, then, some time this week!" growled Cass.

"Then thar's that shootin'-match," pursued 'Bijah. "I don't want to say nothin' about that, as long as Dave Lansin keeps his head shut; an' I only tell you now as thar wa'n't no fool's luck about that, an' I'm ready to meet him, or any one of his crowd, any time they think they've got their hands in, so's you'll 'low as I know how to shoot some, ef I don't have a gang goin' round blowin' fur me!"

'Bijah said this with some warmth, for nothing had touched him so keenly as the injustice he felt had been done him in the matter referred to.

Beyond all things he prided himself on his ability as a shot.

But to whatever ambition he might have in this matter, Cass was quite indifferent. He waited sullenly to see what was to be made of it all.

"Then," pursued 'Bijah, "thar's a mite o' the ready as I've got in the bank. Everybody's jest a-layin' fur that. Dad—you'd 'low as he'd never have no more craps tell he got to borrrer that money; an' mam, she takes on as if butter an' eggs didn't fetch nothin' in market, an' she'd never be able to git another shillin' caliker 'thout she got a slice out of it. An' thar's ole Shadrach Skinner, as 'lowed to let me have that swamp land o' his'n dog cheap—to raise frogs in, I reckon; an' Tim Bussy's dad 'lowed as I must be a fool ef I didn't see the chance to make his fortin an' mine, too, by puttin' that thar patent washin'-machine o' his'n on its legs. An' a pile more has laid fur me, one way an' another; but I says no to 'em all. I reckoned I'd jest keep that mite o' the needful whar I could lay my hands on it when I wanted it.

"An' now," pursued 'Bijah, "what do you 'low as all this hyere is fur?"

"I don't know, and I don't care," growled Cass, with suppressed fierceness.

"Waal, I'll tell ye. It's all along o' my 'lowin', one o' these days, to be able to git to go out in the country whar gold an' Injuns is as thick as fleas."

As 'Bijah thus announced the ambition that had been the guiding principle of his life, his eyes burned with a glow of enthusiasm that replaced their wonted vacancy with intelligence. His whole bearing underwent a change. His slouching figure was drawn erect. Everything about him that had been weak was now strong.

"They want hosses out thar," he went on, "an' them as kin tear a hole in the day; fur now an' ag'in ye have to ride fur yer life, with a pack o' Injuns wakin' snakes behind ye. Then ye've got to know how to shoot, an' to shoot quick an' plumb center; fur it's fight at the drop o' the hat out thar, an' sometimes they do the fightin' first, an' drop the hat afterward. Bart Wescott told me all about it."

At this picture of Western life Cass could not altogether suppress his interest. He, too, had dreamed of the delights of that round of wild adventures. Ever since Beth had been out there he had longed to join her.

However, he said, ungraciously:

"If you're so crazy over that sort of thing, why don't you clear out and go there? I'm sure we'd all be glad to get rid of you!"

"We'll see about that," replied 'Bijah. "But first we'll make another pint."

"T'other day Rosy was playin' with Nero down by the creek, an' 'long comes a gay an' festive chap, togged out to kill. He sees her, an' I sees him; an' by the look on his face I says as he don't want no good o' Rosy."

"He purtends to fall into the creek, an' she runs an' helps him out, an' then he scrapes acquaintance with her the cleverest way you ever see in all your born days."

"But I says to myself, says I, he don't want no good o' Rosy."

"So I follers him, all unbeknownst to Rosy, an' I see him go into Judge Rountree's; an' I says to myself, them Rountrees is all alike, them an' their hull tribe an' generation. Ef he's one o' that crowd, he'll bear watchin'."

"That night, comin' home from 'coon-huntin', I see a light in Jim Rountree's winder; so I slies over thar an' takes in all they was chinnin' about. An' now I'll give you all their rascality as straight as a string."

'Bijah thereupon detailed the conversation he had overheard between the judge and his brother, while Cass stared in amazement and dismay.

"So ye see," he concluded, "it ain't me as they're 'lowin' to marry Rosy to, but this hyere scalawag as is layin' a blind trap fur to put her purty foot in of her own free will. Not as he sets any store by Rosy. Let them Rountrees alone to smell out money, ef thar's any goin'."

"Then, if you knew this, what did you take her that scoundrel's letter for?" cried Cass, warming up again.

"Waal, ye see, ef Jim Rountree had took the notion to marry her to his brother, nothin' you or me could do would hinder him, bein's he had my ole man under his thumb, an' the ole man her guardian; which the same, accordin' to my notion, Jim Rountree, had appinted him, figgerin' on this thing from 'way back."

"It stands to reason as his brother, 'lowin' as

he had to live with her, would druther Rosy would b'lieve as she'd took him because she wanted him, 'stid o' puttin' up with him whether or no; so they got up this hyere scheme. But if it fell through, you bet Jim Rountree ain't the one to balk at puttin' on the thumb-screws."

"So I says to myself, I reckon we'll eucher him yit, ef so be Rosy an' Cass is willin'. Mart, he'll do whatever Rosy says."

"But how eucher him?" asked Cass, with lively interest.

"What's the reason we can't give 'em the slip?"

"Give them the slip? How?"

"Run away."

"But where should we run to, even if we got the chance?"

"To Beth."

"Away in the Rocky Mountains?"

"Why not?"

"We could never find the way."

"I'd find the way."

"You?"

"You bet! I've been postin' up on the quiet fur two year an' more. I've pumped Bart Wescott so dry he 'lowed it 'ud take all the lickin' in ole Missouri to wet his whistle ag'in."

By this time Cass was on his feet, panting with excitement.

"And you mean to help us all to get off, and not to marry Rose?" he asked.

"In course I do! That's jest me!" cried 'Bijah, laughing and rubbing his hands in delight.

"But how? How can we get off without their catching us?" whispered Cass, drawing near and taking hold of 'Bijah in his eagerness.

"Hark to the game o' that Dandy Rountree; an' if you don't agree as we kin play him so's to git a ring in his nose at the finish, then I won't stick up fur no hoss-trade ag'in!"

"He came to me yesterday, playin' off as he didn't know what had become o' Rosy; an' knowin' his hand as if I held it myself, I give him all the rope he wanted."

"I told him what dad he 'lowed an' what mam she 'lowed—mostly mam; an' as to Rosy, she wouldn't have it nohow. An' he reckoned not—no more would he, if he was in her shoes."

"Then he says—why don't I take her like any other feller would—git her a house all by herself, as she could boss to her notion?"

"An' I 'lowed as I'd be willin' to do that any day, if only I could git her."

"But he reckoned as I hadn't the gall fur to paddle my own canoe like that, or I wouldn't let the ole man lead me to water all his days. Leastways, Rosy wa'n't no girl to be tied to no cart-tail for no ole woman to jog to market."

"Then he laughed, an' said he'd dance at my weddin', an' then cleared out."

"But he come back to-day, an' he says as the jedge had told him all about it, an' as how he had a bet with the jedge as he could marry me to Rosy in half the time that dad an' mam would take to do it."

"Then, knowin' his game, I 'lowed as Rosy wouldn't have nothin' to do with me. She was dead sot ag'in' it."

"Then he says as he'd marry us inside of a week; an' I 'lowed, if he done that, he could take his pick out o' Skit an' Scat an' Jin, an' he wouldn't find no hosses to match them in this county."

"He says done!—but I'd have to keep dark to dad an' mam—mostly mam. An' I says a stack o' black cats on a dark night would be a fool to me."

"So he gives me that letter to Rosy; an' he says if that thar works, we'll take Skit an' Scat an' Jin, an' he'll borrrer Lightnin' Bug o' dad, an' he's got a hoss o' his'n what ain't no slow coach, an' we'll all light out between two days—me an' you, an' Rosy an' Mart an' him; an' when dad an' mam wakes up we'll have a weddin' certificate to show 'em, an' noways beholden to them fur it nuther. So dad he can't hold me to no workin' on the farm fur Rosy's keep; an' mam she'll have to git a new churn-dasher fur to keep her in sperits—she can't use Rosy fur to fetch her butter with."

"That's the scheme o' that Dandy Rountree," continued 'Bijah, with an indignant ring in his voice, and a burning of the eye that would have been a revelation to the man who supposed he was making him his dupe, "an' now I'll tell you my scheme: an' ef you don't agree as we kin put a ring in his nose, an' in Judge Rountree's nose, an' in dad's an' mam's—mostly mam's—Good Lord! won't she yowl an' spit an' clapper-claw the ole man, or somebody, when she wakes up an' finds that all her spring chickens has got the pip?"

'Bijah was so amused at the situation to which he had given this figurative expression, that he bent almost double with laughter; but Cass, trembling with excitement over the plot that had been revealed to him, soon recalled him to the hope of escape which he had held out.

Thereupon 'Bijah told his plan; and it must have struck Cass favorably, for at its conclusion he seized 'Bijah's hand, and wringing it hard, said:

"'Bijah, I've used you rougher than—"

"Never mind that. It's all right. You jest

say as you 'low I be your friend, an' Rosy's friend, an' we'll call it quits."

"I do believe it, with all my heart; an' if you're ever in a pinch and I don't stand by you for this, I hope I may get left bad when I need help most."

'Bijah was so delighted with the outcome of his diplomacy, that he threw back his head and burst into an uproarious laugh, and flinging his arms about Cass, executed with him a sort of dance that could be likened only to a Texas steer with the blind staggers trying to waltz.

CHAPTER VI.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

"You've got it?"

Hal Rountree's eyes glistened with suppressed excitement, and he thrust forth his hand eagerly.

"What's the reason I hain't?" asked 'Bijah, with a grin of triumph.

From his pocket he drew forth a letter, and passed it with a flourish.

"By Jove! you're a trump!" cried Hal, suddenly flushing where he had been pale with suspense.

So eager was he to learn the fate of his nefarious enterprise, that he only half-turned his back, and walked away a step or two, while he tore open the letter and devoured its contents almost at a glance.

"Dad didn't see me; no more did mam," declared 'Bijah, wagging his head with a simplicity of satisfaction that made him look fairly idiotic. "Dad, he ain't much; but mam, she's got eyes like burnt holes in a blanket. There ain't much goes on whar she is that she don't nose out first or last. But I stole a march on her this time!"

Hal turned round radiant with delight.

"Well," he said, "I thought we had pretty sharp fellows in the East, but I'm ready to own that the West is the place to come when you want a thing done up in style."

To himself he was saying, as he regarded 'Bijah's broad grin:

"You born idiot! Was there ever such a farce as this?—a lover helping another fellow to run away with his sweetheart!"

But he extended his hand, and grasped 'Bijah's in hearty congratulation.

"What does she say?" asked 'Bijah, eagerly following with his eye the letter Hal was thrusting into his pocket.

"She says yes, of course," replied Hal, giving the hand of his Mercury another congratulatory squeeze.

"But I must see the boys—or Cass, at any rate. We want a perfect understanding, so that there will be no chance of a hitch."

"I reckon you hadn't better try to git to see Cass," objected 'Bijah. "Mam, she's got her eye on him worse'n a cat watchin' a mouse. Ef she or dad was to ketch you two together, they'd guess thar was somethin' up. I'm most afraid they've seen you hangin' round hyere as it is. Now, with me it's different. Nobody don't suspicion me. So we'll fix it up between us accordin' to your ideas; an' ye kin count on Cass doin't whatever we agree to."

'Bijah's real objection to a meeting between them, was the fear that Cass would not be equal to the dissimulation necessary to prevent Hal from suspecting the good faith of this apparent yielding to his wishes. A single hasty word, or even an indignant flush, might ruin everything.

"Now I think of it, I orter tell ye, sence that letter o' yourn, Cass an' me has had a right friendly talk. He was 'lowin' to nigh about chaw me up when dad an' mam—mostly mam—'lowed to run things to their notion. I didn't reckon he'd never come round, no more'n Rosy."

Then, gazing at Hal with a grin of admiration:

"I'm 'lowin', Mr. Rountree, as you're knowin' to girls' ways to beat any thing I ever did see!"

"Oh, well," answered Hal, "there are different ways of going at a thing, of course. If you will excuse me for saying so, it didn't take much to see that the prospect held out to the young lady wasn't particularly inviting."

So much he said, laughing in his sleeve; and then, lest even 'Bijah should take from it his true meaning, he added:

"You might be twenty years waiting for those old shoes."

"Mam, she's a scorcher—I orter know that," assented 'Bijah, shaking his head as if over confirmatory memories. "An' dad, he's tougher'n a burr-oak knot. I reckon he'll hang on mid-dlin' stiddy; an' he'll be the same ole sawyer till the end."

"He came near scagging your craft for you!" laughed Hal. "But there!—I owe you a little something for this, and if it goes through, all right—"

Strangely forgetful of the way the thing was supposed to look to 'Bijah, Hal, in his delighted forecasting of the future as he saw it, drew some money from his pocket and held it out.

With a quick mounting of the blood into his face, 'Bijah shrunk back as Cass might have done, exclaiming:

"Oh, no! I ain't takin' yer money!"

"Nonsense!" cried Hal, who was used to "tip-ping" with a royal hand those who served him.

"I'll owe you more'n you owe me," urged 'Bijah, recovering himself even before Hal did. "I shall win my bet," Hal hastened to explain, "and it ain't every day that any one gets into Jim."

"But money ain't nowhar along o' Rosy," insisted 'Bijah.

"You're a loyal lover," said Hal, smiling in spite of himself, as he thought of the game he was playing upon his dupe. "Well, virtue is its own reward. So, until we meet again!"

And with a light wave of his hand he took his leave.

He was scarcely out of sight, when he drew the letter from his pocket and read it again, laughing gayly:

"Well, was there ever such a modest little thing! Hang me if I don't believe I shall get downright spoony over her, unless the jog-trot of matrimony is a great dispeller of illusions. It's a shame to play such a trick on her, I swear."

The letter was well calculated to give him the impression it did.

From what 'Bijah laughingly called his "forced conversion," Cass had gone to his sister and explained the true situation to her.

At first she shed some bitter tears over the shattering of her first love-dream; for she had conceived a romantic fancy for Hal.

But luckily it was *only* a romantic fancy, and soon her eyes sparkled through their tears with indignation.

Then, overjoyed that she was coming off with so little harm, Cass told her of 'Bijah's counter-plot.

At first she objected to the deception it involved, but Cass summarily disposed of that.

"You must fight the devil with fire!" he quoted.

And so cleverly did he argue the matter, that she soon set her wits to work to hoodwink the man who had plotted to make her girlish affections a mere stepping-stone to wealth.

It was this production that Hal Rountree, who thought that he knew women thoroughly, was now laughing over.

"Mr. Rountree—dearsir! Ha! ha! ha! Was there ever such silvan simplicity as that? The child ought to be a vestal. And—'Respectfully—Rose Crawford.' Oh, ye gods!

"An impairment of the fraternal relations between Jim and me! That is good! But such a tender little thing! Hang me, if I don't half-believe I'm the least bit in love with her! She's too shy to put one word of love on paper; but I've seen it already in her eyes and cheeks. I believe I like that best of all about her."

So he sauntered on through his fool's paradise, his vanity blinding him to what might have appeared to a coldly critical eye.

Meanwhile, every preparation was made—even more than he dreamed of!—and the night of flight came.

"Was there ever such a farce?" whispered Cass, so delighted with the situation that he hugged Rose and kissed her in the darkness. "No need to drug the tea and toddy of the old folks. They will rival the Seven Sleepers, or pretend to. And to think that we know that they know all about this thing, and that, while they are pretending to be asleep, to fool us, we are pretending to believe they are asleep, to fool them!"

"Hush! hush!" whispered Rose, clapping her hand on his mouth, as she felt him struggling with a snicker.

"And there's 'Bijah," he persisted, "who has to act as if he thought he was stealing a march on them, all the time knowing that they suppose they are coming it over him finely. But won't *Mirandy*—and he mimicked Mr. Losy's pronunciation of his wife's name—"tear her hair when the whole thing comes out!"

Mart could get no sport out of these reflections. Everything was so stealthy in seeming, that he could not realize that the slightest incaution would not fetch their guardians down upon them like griffins intercepting the flight of the fairy princess—that, instead, they were as anxious that there should be no interruption as were the fugitives themselves.

All of the party were in their stocking-feet, carrying their shoes in their hands; and poor Mart's lips were quite bloodless could they but have seen them in the darkness, his eyes dilated, and his skin cold with a clammy ooze, as he clung trembling and fairly shivering to his sister's hand.

Rose, now that the crisis was upon her, manifested, as the most timid women sometimes do, a courage that would scarcely have been expected of her.

A pretty motherly instinct of protection made her almost forget herself in her younger brother.

So they stole out of the house, to be met scarcely a step from the door by Hal.

He had planned everything very cleverly, as he thought. 'Bijah was left in charge of the horses, while Hal himself was to escort the bride-elect from the house to the spot.

He calculated on at least getting possession of her hand and whispering some tender nonsense into her ear, and possibly, if she yielded him sufficient encouragement to show that he would not startle her prematurely, to encircle her

waist and steal a kiss under cover of the darkness.

But now he found Mart clinging to one of Rose's hands, while Cass held her arm on the other side.

Hal had the tact not to press his claims at such a time, and so hurried them all forward to the horses.

"There 'Bijah sprung forward and seized the girl, with a burst of half-acted and half-real love.

"Oh, Rosy!" he exclaimed, with a laugh of delight.

And almost before even she knew it he had put her on the back of Scat, the favorite of his horses.

"Well, I swear!" reflected Hal, with a very peculiar feeling of blended amusement and indignation. "There's nothing slow about *that* lover! He has actually cut me out. I'll be hanged if I don't begin to believe I shall have to be sharp, or he'll be beforehand with me even at the wedding!"

Even on horseback he did not get his expected place beside Rose.

Mart expressed some timidity, and Rose said that he should ride close beside her.

"And I'll ride with you, Mr. Rountree, while you point out the way we're to go," said Cass, in a tone of lively interest. "'Bijah can fetch up the rear.

"And mind," he cautioned, "you keep an ear open, and warn us if you hear any one following."

"Well," thought Hal, as he acquiesced in this arrangement, "am I playing second fiddle to these youngsters, or what? And how am I to ascertain my exact status with Miss Rose? Does she expect me to lead her directly to the minister? Maybe she is even now comparing my seeming want of ardor with 'Bijah's unmistakable devotion."

He laughed at the idea of being at a disadvantage—he, "the pet of the ladies," as he was called—in competition with 'Bijah, but for all that he felt annoyed.

Everything was so entirely different from what he had counted upon, that he was for the moment at a loss how to break this awkward arrangement, without running the risk of shocking the sensitiveness of this little dove of maidenhood, of whom he could not feel quite sure till he had her safely snared in his matrimonial springle.

He had arranged to take Rose to a country tavern, and from there send 'Bijah on a wild-goose chase after Minister No. 1, at a sufficient distance to keep him out of the way till the ceremony between Rose and himself had been securely performed by Minister No. 2.

On his return 'Bijah would find them gone, leaving behind them a note explaining how they had outwitted him.

If Rose proved too shy to assent to the marriage at once, Hal had arranged to take her and her brothers to a place of pretended hiding, where, by prosecuting his wooing on the one hand and playing upon her fears on the other, he had no doubt of his ultimate success.

"I suppose, then," was his summing up of the situation, "I shall have to let the matter rest as it is till we get to the tavern. With this brilliant rival of mine out of the way, there will then intervene nothing between me and the object of our mutual admiration."

He was laughing to himself over this whimsical view of the case, when 'Bijah spurred his horse past Rose and Mart, and overtook those in advance.

"What is the matter?" cried Cass, turning in his saddle in affected anxiety. "You haven't heard any one after us already?"

"No," replied 'Bijah. "I only wanted to speak to Mr. Rountree about somethin' that I forgot till this blessed minute."

As he spoke he rode up abreast with Hal, on the side opposite to Cass.

"What is it?" asked Hal, turning his way.

'Bijah drew near, and bending toward Hal, dropped his voice to a low, confidential tone.

His attention thus engrossed, Hal did not see what Cass set about doing.

"I want to be sure to have this thing done up all accordin' to Gunter," said 'Bijah, "so's it will stand lawin' as well as jawin', ef the ole man gits his back up. Dad, he's an off ox when he's riled, an' mam, she's fittin' to set him up to e'na'most anythin' when her dander's riz. When they find as I ain't lowin' to work the farm, they may lay fur to knock the hull thing in the head."

"Oh, you needn't worry about that," was Hal's assurance, as he struggled to preserve a grave face. "A marriage is a marriage, and there ain't any going back on it when it's once done. I'll look out for all that."

"But, Mr. Rountree, I was lowin', jest now, as we'd orter have a ring. Ye see, I ain't much on marryin', myself, an' the thing clean slipped my head till a minute ago. I was lowin' ef we could borrow one—"

"That's of no material consequence. But if you're particular about it, I think I have a ring that will do."

"Waal, now, you're the kind of a man as I like to know!" declared 'Bijah, in a tone of re-

lief and gratitude. "If it won't be puttin' ye out, I would like to have the thing done up in shape. Ye see, I set a store by Rosy, an' girls likes to have things done up about right—specially when they're steppin' off fur good an' all."

"I didn't know you were such a lady's-man!" laughed Hal. "But you may count on it's being all according to Gunter, as you say."

"I'm downright obleeged to ye—I be so!" declared 'Bijah.

"You'd better go back and look out that we're not overtaken," said Cass, with apparent nervousness.

Indeed, he did not have altogether to affect this, for he was shaking so with suppressed excitement, now that the crisis was really at hand, that he could not have made his voice steady if he had tried.

"I'm a-goin'," answered 'Bijah, pulling up his horse, "an' a-feelin' better'n when I come."

Then Cass burst out:

"Look! look! What's that?"

And pointing on ahead, he drew rein as if in abject terror.

"What?" asked Hal, involuntarily restraining his horse.

They had just emerged from the dense shadow of overhanging trees into a stretch of broad moonlight, and Cass seemed to be pointing to where the road again plunged into darkness.

As he strained his eyes to penetrate the gloom, Hal at the same instant saw a black line pass between his eye and the sky, and heard a sharp, though suppressed cry of alarm from Rose's lips.

The next moment he felt the bight of a noose pinioning his arms to his sides!

"Eh! What's the meaning of this?" he cried, turning his head to look over his shoulder in the direction in which the strain came.

"It means," began 'Bijah, reining his horse to the right, to secure the tension of his improvised lasso.

Then he paused.

It was Cass's voice, ringing high and clear with a burst of long-suppressed hatred, that concluded the answer, as a noose from his side went over Hal's head, and seconded the bight of 'Bijah's.

"That we've got you!"

CHAPTER VII.

A TERRIBLE PUNISHMENT.

HAL ROUNTREE had been so sure of his game that for a moment he was utterly nonplused.

It was plain that the boys—or rather the boy and man, if one considered 'Bijah's years—were in collusion to capture him.

But why?

Was it possible—but this seemed too absurd to be for a moment entertained—that Cass favored the union of his sister with 'Bijah, and so had conspired with him against Rose as well as against Hal?

But this was no time for inactive speculation. The thing was to regain his liberty.

His first impulse was to spur his horse forward, and so break away from his captors.

He did this with a will; but Cass and 'Bijah, who were mounted on Skit and Jin respectively, easily kept pace with him, which was evidence that they had measured their horses against his in advance.

Meanwhile 'Bijah called out to him:

"Hold on, Mr. Rountree! It's lucky for you that we don't leave you yer head. You'd only pull the saddles off our horses, or land yerself out o' your own. You'd better let up on that sort o' thing, fur we don't low to race after you only long enough to give ye warnin'."

The strain on the lassos, as both Cass and 'Bijah gradually slackened the pace of their horses, was evidence enough that persistence would only goad his horse from under him.

Hal sought another and most desperate remedy.

He reached for his hip-pocket!

"Look out!" cried Cass, in alarm, as his quick eye detected the motion. "He's going to shoot!"

"Not yet awhile," declared 'Bijah, confidently.

And with a sharp dig of the spur, he made Jin bound forward like the springing of a trap.

His broad hand closed over Hal's on the butt of the weapon.

"Let up, Mr. Rountree," he commanded, with a wrench that made Hal's wrist crack.

Hal's hand clung to the pistol only long enough to draw it out of the pocket and fling it away in the bushes that grew beside the road, where it was lost beyond recovery in the darkness.

"You cursed idiot!" he grated, between his teeth.

"Your master," replied 'Bijah, coolly.

This was too humiliating!

Furious with rage, and regardless of what might happen to him, Hal began to struggle like a madman.

He would have flung himself from the saddle, even at the risk of being dragged at the heels of the horses—anything but submit!

"A boy," he said to himself, "and an imbecile!"

But not a sound further escaped him. He fought in silence, like a bulldog.

"Hang to him!" cried Cass. "He'll get away!"

'Bijah threw an arm about his captive's neck, and so held him in a very uncomfortable chancery, as the horses sawed up and down beside each other.

"I don't want to hurt ye, Mr. Rountree," he said. "Give in, an' I'll go easy on ye; but if you keep up this hyere squirming, I'll have to crack ye on the head."

"Hit him one anyway," shouted Cass. "What's the use of running any risks with such a hound?"

"I'd druther not, ef I don't have to," answered 'Bijah.

Hal never relaxed his efforts for an instant, nor did he speak a word.

"Hyere goes!" warned 'Bijah. "You're bound to have it. Give in an' I'll spare ye. One! two! The last call! Waal, you're a contrary beast, after all!"

And, his patience finally exhausted, 'Bijah raised his hand and let it fall quickly.

"That finishes him!" he said.

And indeed he held a limp body in his arms, half drawn across the saddle.

"That's a good job!" declared Cass, with no relenting. "I wish I had given it to him. The dog!—to think he could say *How d'ye do!* to my sister, and then lead her off to be married!"

The horses were soon brought to a standstill, and 'Bijah dismounted, and laid Hal on his back beside the road.

"You keep Rosy from comin' up hyere," he said, as he knelt beside the unconscious man.

"It ain't no sight fur such as her to see. Don't let on that we had to crack him. She'll 'low as as we've used him rougher'n we had any need to. Girls is all chicken-hearted."

"Be sure you tie him up before he comes round, even if he isn't playin' 'possum," cautioned Cass.

"If you'd got that crack on your knowledge-box, you wouldn't 'low as there was any chance fur playin' 'possum," answered 'Bijah. "But leave me to take keer o' him."

Rose and Mart had been left behind in that wild scamper. Not that their horses were not good enough to have kept pace, but that fear made their riders only half-hearted in urging them forward.

"What have you done to him?" asked Rose, tremulously, as Cass intercepted her further advance.

"We've captured him, and 'Bijah is tying him up, so that we'll have no more trouble with him," answered Cass, with an implacable ring in his voice.

"You haven't—hurt him?" faltered Rose.

"Not half as much—not a millionth part as much as he'd have hurt you, the graceless scamp!" growled Cass, vengefully.

"But—but—what have you done? Oh, Cass!"

"You needn't waste any sympathy on him. But, there! if you're so troubled about it, you can tell him how sorry you are, in a minute."

"All right, 'Bijah!" he shouted.

"All right!" came back the response.

"Come on!" said Cass. "If I was a girl, I'd have more backbone about me than that."

Rose was weeping silently.

The moment her enemy was overcome, she began to pity him.

They reached the spot where captor and captive waited, to find Hal conscious and standing upon his feet.

It was plain to be seen that his hands were bound behind his back, and 'Bijah held him by one arm; but at sight of this apparent carelessness, Cass cried out in alarm:

"Look out, 'Bijah! What do you mean by giving him such a chance? He has only to break and run for it, and he'll get away from you yet!"

"He wouldn't git fur," replied 'Bijah, as Cass hastily leaped to the ground to repair the seeming incaution. "I've hopped enough critters in my time to know when I've got 'em so's they won't do no tall cavortin'."

Then Cass saw that Hal's ankles were bound, with enough free rope between them to allow him to take an ordinary step in walking, but so that an attempt to run at any speed would only trip him up.

"That's better!" declared Cass, with marked satisfaction.

The blood had streamed into Hal's face as Rose came up, to be a witness of his humiliation.

He looked searchingly into her face, to discover what might be her relations to this counterplot.

She drew rein at a little distance, looking at him sadly, but entering no protest.

He smiled sarcastically.

"Well," was his not over-agreeable reflection, "I seem to have been hoodwinked all round. I wonder if my simple little maid is going to turn out to be a very subtle little maid. But I'm an old stager to be surprised at anything in the sex. They're a delusion and a snare to the end of the chapter."

The lump on his head, where he had received the compliments of the season from some hard weapon in the hands of his captor, ached; but the humiliation of a miscarriage in a love affair with these rustics was so bitter as to make him almost unconscious of physical ills.

How his comrades of the East—of both sexes—would laugh, if this misadventure ever got to their ears!

"If you'll put yer right foot in the stirrup, we'll mount you ag'in, Mr. Rountree," said 'Bijah, with unruffled politeness.

It was evident that Hal was convinced of the futility of contending with him, for he complied at once, and soon his feet were bound securely under his horse's belly.

Then they rode on at a brisk pace, 'Bijah now taking the place of guide, and Cass no longer manifesting any apprehension of their being followed.

"How completely they have played me!" reflected Hal.

Shortly after his overthrow, they took a very different direction from that which he had expected to follow, so that they would go far wide of the place where the minister he had employed awaited them.

"The very spot where they were to spring upon me was arranged beforehand by that knowing imbecile!" thought the captive. "That belying face of his would be worth a fortune to any sharper."

His growing opinion of 'Bijah's parts was confirmed when, well toward morning, they reached a cave into which he was led.

"Now," said 'Bijah, "though you've kept a close mouth sence we caught you in your own trap, I reckon you've some nateral curiosity to know what we're 'lowin' to do with you."

"I'll give it to ye straight, an' as short as I kin."

"Firstly, we've got you an' your brother, Jim Rountree, down fine."

"Jim, he lets on to be a boss hand at runnin' law an' order. Waal, he's an ornery ole bull at law, but he ain't a yearlin', to my way o' thinkin', at order. He never gits no sich scalawag in jail as when he goes visitin' thar himself!"

"You? You're one o' them figgers what they call mashers. Now, a masher is mighty small pertaters, an' few in a hill. We hadn't no use fur 'em in these parts."

"When you git back thar, an' tell 'em how the feller as they sot down fur everybody's fool took you in, body an' breeches, you say to Jim Rountree, fur me, that he had dad an' mam under his thumb, jest as he got 'most everybody else; but he never owned 'Bijah Losy—never, the best day he ever see! Tell him, fur me, that I'm up to his sneakin' trick about that thar farm in Pennsylvania, an' ef he don't cut a clean swarth while I'm away, when I git back I'll make him wish't he was a pocket gopher, so's he could crawl into a hole an' pull the hole in after him!"

Never had Hal or Cass seen such a transformation as they now witnessed. In the ruddy light of the torch that illuminated the cavern, 'Bijah loomed like a giant.

He stood in an attitude of command, one clinched fist drawn back, and one shaken alternately above his head. His face set in hard lines of anger, his voice ringing out loud and clear—everything about him was new and strange. He who had thus far gone shuffling through the world, with look and manner apologizing for his very existence, now for the first time stood forth a fearless freeman.

"Now," he went on, "we're 'lowin' to leave you hyere—not to starve to death; you needn't be afeard o' that. But we ain't 'lowin' to give you no chance to come doggin' our heels, or to set arybody else after us, the minute our backs is turned."

"I'm a-goin' to tie you up—a good deal tighter'n you be now—so tight that you won't git out of it till somebody comes an' lets you out. You're goin' to spend three days hyere, as comfortable as you kin under the circumstances. The clearer your conscience is, the less you'll have to think over. But I reckon thar's enough on the mite of a soul you've got, to keep you busy the heft o' the time."

"We're 'lowin' to start you on a good squar' meal; so you'd better stow away as much o' this hyere grub as your ribs'll hold convenient. That an' the nibblin' you'll git the best way you kin, will keep the worthless life in you fur three days. Nobody wouldn't starve in that time, even with less."

"Hyere's water—oceans of it—runnin' acrost the floor o' this cave. When you're dry, ye kin roll over to it an' drink yer fill, an' when you've got enough, you kin roll away ag'in."

"Now, how do we 'low to let you out o' hyere at the end o' three days? I reckon you're feelin' a mite curious about that. Waal, it's this hyere way:

"Hyere's half a dozen letters, as Cass has wrote to different parties, all of 'em livin' fur enough off so's they can't git these an' come fur you, or send word to your brother, inside o' three days. Out o' the lot, some of 'em is bound to look after you; so you're safe."

"That gives us three days start o' you, ef you take the notion to foller us. But let me put a

bee in your bonnet. You won't take none of us easy! Ef ye don't believe that, ask anybody who cleaned out Dave Lansin' at the last shoot-in'-match!"

Hal Rountree saw that nothing he could say or do would make the slightest change in his fate; so he took 'Bijah's advice about eating all he could, and said not a word.

He was then tied so that he could roll back and forth from some food that was laid on the bottom of the cavern, to the water that trickled by, settling in the hollow of the rock. But he was tethered so that he could not roll out of the cave.

"I wish I could leave ye a light," said 'Bijah, "fur it'll be purty tough layin' hyere fur three days, all alone by yerself, with a conscience that I reckon will ha'n't ye some. But after these hyere torches burn out, you'll find that enough light will come in hyere from a hole in the top o' the cave, so's you kin tell day from night, an' so count the time. That's the best we kin do fur ye; an' always remember that ye brought it on yerself by your rascality."

"Ef you git impatient, you kin amuse yerself by yellin' as much as ye like. It'll be a long time before anybody'll hyear ye!"

"An' now thar's one more pint. We've got to take dad's boss, Lightnin' Bug; but we ain't stealin' him. Dad has offered him fur sale fur the last month, to anybody as 'ud plank his price. So Rosy an' the boys has all signed a paper 'lowin' him to take the price o' the critter out o' the money o' theirs he's got. I reckon that's a mite crooked at law, but Jim Rountree kin find some crook that'll let it in, ef he's a mind to. Anyway, it's the best we could do."

"Your boss we'll tether whar he kin get grass an' water, an' the letters will tell whar to find him."

"An' now, this is the last you'll see of us. I hope this hyere will do you some good."

They went away, and the prisoner was left to his own reflections.

He had "carried a stiff upper lip," and uttered not a word of protest.

However, as he listened to their retreating footsteps till they died away in the passage leading to the outer world, a sense of loneliness and desolation crept over him such as he had never dreamed of.

The words "entombed alive!" occurred to him, with such vividness that it almost seemed as if some voice had whispered them into his ears.

He thought of prisoners of whom he had read, buried for years, if not for life, in horrible underground dungeons.

But watchful jailers were ever near them, visiting them daily, bringing them food, and, above all, the blessed knowledge that they were not utterly forgotten of men!

But he! Those who alone knew of his whereabouts were fleeing ever further and further away, leaving his fate to depend on the slender contingency of half a dozen letters!

Half a dozen! How easily all might miscarry! One person might be away from home; another might be ill; a third might not attach sufficient importance to such a communication—might even think it a hoax! A fourth might neglect the matter, supposing that others would look after it!

To whom were these letters addressed? They might be the most irresponsible of persons! Why had he not asked? What was his pride now?

Half a dozen! Only half a dozen! To risk a life on such a paltry number! They should have made it a hundred! They should have scwn them broadcast!

Half a dozen! He was a lost man!

All this passed through his mind in a flash. An icy sweat of terror started from every pore. He burst into a wild shriek for help.

Nothing but the hollow echoes of the cavern replied. They were gone—utterly gone!

Could he release himself? He was afraid to tug at his bonds, lest he draw the knots tighter. He lay perfectly still, and thought of all possible ways to slip his hands out of the ropes.

Gently he tried one arm, and then the other. In despair he drew steadily upon one, with increasing force. In sudden rage, he sought to burst his bonds. Then, in mad terror, he began to struggle, writhing with the strength of a maniac, until his flesh was lacerated, and the cords seemed to gnaw his very bones.

All to no avail! 'Bijah had done his work well. The prisoner stopped, exhausted.

Then despair settled down upon him. The conviction that he would never again see the sun or hear the birds sing seemed to clog his brain like an all-enveloping fog. He lay in a dead apathy, till he fell asleep—the sleep of utter physical prostration.

CHAPTER VIII.

"SOLD!"

JUDGE ROUNTREE stood aghast.

For three days he had been hopeful, though anxious. The hopeful sign was that he heard nothing from Hal; the ominous sign, that he had heard nothing from 'Bijah.

If the marriage had taken place, why had not the duped lover returned home?

On the morning following the elopement, Lish Losy made a parade of a mysterious inter-

view with the judge, which set the gossips all agog.

Then followed a sham search, in which Losy was careful to keep away from where he supposed the fugitives were likely to be found.

Judge Rountree shrouded himself in stern silence, which gave the impression that he was greatly chagrined by the scandal.

And now had come a letter like a thunder-clap from a clear sky. The keen-witted man of the world had been overreached by one whom everybody had accounted but little better than a fool.

Judge Rountree stood with the letter crumpled in his clinched hand, staring into vacancy, as if to penetrate the veiled future, while a cold perspiration oozed from every pore in his body.

The uncertain fate of his brother was not what affected him the most. In his rage he felt that any one who would allow himself to be so taken in deserved what he got.

Nor did he care so much for the possible discovery of his plot, if only it had been successful. But to fail, and so ridiculously, galled him to the quick.

Thus far he had always had the laugh on his side. He was a clever fellow—sharp as a brier. But now, how could he face the covert smiles that would greet him wherever he went?

Then there was the loss of the money—no trifle.

A horseman dashed up to the house, and made his way into the presence of the judge with haste that left little margin for ceremony.

"Why, judge!" he cried; "what in Heaven's name is the meaning of this?"

And he thrust into his hand another of the letters with which 'Bijah had hedged about Hal Rountree's precious life.

"Your brother?" he went on. "I never knew that you had a brother, till I got this. And what to make of it, I'm blessed if I know!"

Judge Rountree glanced through it far enough to get its import, while his face flushed crimson and then paled with rage.

So these accursed letters had been sown broadcast, with the express purpose of making him the butt of ridicule.

Between his teeth he execrated the brother who had brought him to such a strait, but he kept his wits about him nevertheless.

How could he close the mouth of this man?

He was shrewd enough to take the most certain and the most expeditious way of accomplishing this end.

Tossing the letter carelessly into the fire, he said, with undisguised annoyance:

"I have a brother, who has been making a fool of himself; and some good friend of yours and mine has seen in it a chance for a practical joke upon us. If you have taken this ride for nothing but to bring me that letter, I think you have got rather the worst of it. I am obliged to you, all the same, for your good intentions. But you must excuse me from going into the details of a matter that is nothing to me, and that I have heard all I want to about it. Any one on the street will be glad to enlighten you."

The horseman looked chagrined, and swore without disguise. He went out, mounted his horse, and rode away, without stopping to exchange a word with any one. His only anxiety was to get out of the place without having it known that he had "bit at such bait."

Judge Rountree now sought Lish Losy.

"Well!" he said, "a pretty mess they've made of this affair!"

And he gave Losy the letter to read.

But the farmer made such plodding work of it, that the judge soon interrupted him, and stated the fact in language that borrowed force from its terseness.

"That 'Bijah?" cried Losy, when he understood the situation. "Waal, he looked the fool, an' t'other one—"

But here he remembered that "t'other one" was the judge's own brother; so he refrained from saying that he had acted it.

Instead, he fell to scratching his head reflectively, as he substituted:

"I wouldn't 'a' believed he had it in him!"

"What did I tell you, Lish Losy?" burst in his wife, who was one of those persons who can always recall a prophecy to fit any event. "Time an' time ag'in I've said—"

But Judge Rountree had no interest in the past. The present fully occupied him.

"What we want," he said, interrupting the lady without so much as an apologetic bow, "is to go to the cave mentioned here, and get that jackass out of the way of prying eyes."

He thereupon told of the way he had bluffed the unwelcome friend who had come fifty miles to serve him.

Lish did not "drop" to this.

"If the critter's starvin', we'll have to fetch him home an' take keer of him," he urged.

"We shall have to do nothing of the kind!" insisted the judge. "No one must ever know that this thing has turned out as it has. Hal must disappear, and we must seem to suppose that he is with Rose. Meanwhile we must overtake the runaways, and fetch them to terms. It will be as easy yet to force her to marry Hal as to marry your son. After that is an accom-

plished fact, I can snap my fingers in the face of the world. I don't care how soon they discover how it was done, when once it is done."

"But 'Bijah, he's got his dander up; an' when he's sot, he's a wicked one."

"We'll have to take the wickedness out of him! Meanwhile, I must depend upon you to do this; it will not do for me to be absent. There is no telling how many fellows like this will be down upon us, and I must be on hand to head them off."

"What'll I do with your brother, if I find him?"

"Take him anywhere where he will not be known, and have him taken care of, if he needs it. But above all things guard against prying curiosity."

"If you'll let me git a word in edgeways," said Mrs. Losy, with an air of suppressed anger at the judge's scant courtesy, "I may help you out of a corner."

"Anything you can suggest, madam!" said the judge, stiffly.

"What's the reason we can't fetch him hyere? I'll take keer of him, an' keep pryin' eyes—"

"The very thing! Mrs. Losy, we are really indebted to you. If you will accompany your husband—"

"We're as good as gone," interrupted Mrs. Losy, greatly mollified by his Honor's hearty appreciation. "Lish, jest remember that that hoss, Lightnin' Bug, is a goner if we don't—"

"Which we will!" declared Losy with a firm set of the lips.

They set out forthwith; while Judge Rountree returned to his post, to play indifference, and to keep those whom Cass's letters had enlisted in Hal's safety from making the real situation public.

Losy and his wife reached the cave, and entered it, to find therein the most pitiable spectacle they had ever witnessed.

Hal yet lay in his bonds, and even before the rescuers found him, he heard their approaching footsteps, and set up an inarticulate howl of excitement.

The agony of suspense had nearly driven him into imbecility. Again and again he had exhausted himself by vain shrieks for help. A hundred times had he fancied that he heard some one walking near, only to pass on, heedless of his appeals.

Now, at sight of these human beings who had come with the hope of life once more, he burst into tears, and cried like a child.

He could scarcely persuade himself that they were realities, and not figments of his imagination.

It was to the woman that he clung when Lish had released his hands.

How he pleaded with her not to leave him, even after she had assured him again and again that he was now safe.

He had gnawed at the food that 'Bijah had left him, and drank of the water that rippled across the floor of the cavern; yet he was worn down to such a state of emaciation as would seem to indicate weeks of wasting illness.

He was so weak that he could not stand, or scarcely move a hand.

They lifted him between them, and even while they were carrying him out of the cavern he fell into a sleep of utter exhaustion.

Taking him at some distance from the mouth of the cave, and leaving him in the care of Mrs. Losy, Lish returned to remove all traces of his occupancy, so that any one coming to the cave in response to Cass's letters would find nothing to reward his humanity.

Going out when this work was accomplished, he came face to face with one about to enter.

"Waal, I swar! Hyere's somebody ahead o' me!" declared the new-comer.

"Looks like we are on the same errand," observed Losy, vailing his real anxiety behind the look of stolidity habitual with him. "A fool's errand!" he added.

"After Jim Rountree's brother, I reckon?" queried the stranger.

"Yes," answered Losy. "Did you git one o' them cussed letters?"

"You bet, stranger! Do I begin to smell a sell? Your countenance ain't encouragin'."

"You kin go in an' look fur yourself," said Losy, indifferently. "I reckon the darker we keep about our comin' hyere, the less it'll cost us standin' treat. I'm goin' home, an' I'm bound to stay thar."

"Waal, I reckon I'll know enough not to go huntin' no mare's nests, another time!" laughed the other. "But I don't mind standin' my first treat now. Take somethin'."

And he handed out his "pocket pistol."

Losy rode away with him, their ways lying in the same direction for some miles.

When, having got rid of him, Lish returned, he found his wife in a state of great excitement, believing that he had got lost in the cave, and hesitating about risking her own precious self in its maze in quest of him.

She had shouted herself hoarse from just within its mouth, and when the cause of his absence was explained, she declared that she should include this in her account with Judge Rountree.

Hal was taken to her house without discov-

ery, and when his brother visited him, he lay in a deep sleep, like one hovering on the brink of the grave.

With folded arms Judge Rountree stood frowning down at him. He had not yet forgiven him for allowing himself to be trapped.

When Hal woke, this want of sympathy restored him to something like his wonted temper of mind, though he was yet so weak that he could scarcely speak above a whisper.

"Well, Jim," he laughed, "accidents will happen in the best-regulated families! That fellow was more of a fraud than a fool."

"What we want to know," said Judge Rountree, coldly, "is where he is to be found."

"Don't look to me for enlightenment," replied Hal. "He didn't take me into his confidence as to his contemplated movements."

"You can give us no clew?"

"None whatever."

"But he must have said something to you."

"H'm!"—and Hal's eyes began to twinkle.

"Come to think, I believe he did send a message to you."

"To me?"

"To the effect that, if you didn't walk a chalk-line while he was gone, when he got back he'd make you wish you were a pocket gopher, so that you could creep into a hole and pull the hole in after you. It seems that he has got wind of the value of the Pennsylvania farm."

"He has, eh?"

The judge did not start nor raise his voice. However, his eyes contracted slowly.

"Let me give you a point," said Hal. "If you conclude to have another hand with that fellow, take a second look at your cards first."

"And you?" asked the judge, cautiously.

"Ob, I'm out of the game," replied Hal. "I like money, and I like revenge, but I like my ease best of all. And I am completely disillusionized as to that angel. I fancy she could—"

"That is of no interest to me," interrupted the judge.

He thereupon told Hal that he expected him to keep in retirement until the matter was settled one way or the other.

Hal made a wry face.

"The way of the transgressor is hard!" he quoted, mockingly.

Judge Rountree turned away, his disgust unexpressed.

When he was gone Hal closed his eyes and lay panting. Such an effort had it cost him to hide his real weakness from his brother.

"Out of the game!" he repeated to himself. "I should say so—for some time to come, at any rate. But Jim? Well, the devil looked out of his eyes, though he kept his mouth shut. Our friend 'Bijah will hear from him again."

In this he was right; for, his face as hard as stone, the disappointed judge at once planned with Lish Losy the first move in the new campaign.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WAGON-TRAIN.

WHEN Cass and 'Bijah came out of the cave where they had left Hal Rountree a prisoner, they did not find it easy to meet the inquiring eyes of Rose, who was pale with pity and anxiety.

Mart was wide-eyed with curiosity; but, being a boy, he had not his sister's quick sympathy.

'Bijah was anxious to turn the thoughts of all away from this subject, which even he did not view with entire equanimity.

"Now that we're shut of that ornery critter," he remarked, "we'll go to our cache, an' then, ho fur the West!"

The cache proved to be a perfect magazine of stores.

One by one Cass and Mart had smuggled out such garments for themselves and Rose as would be necessary for their contemplated journey.

As everything would have to be carried in saddle-bags, they had limited themselves to a change of underclothing, save that Rose had an extra dress and some little trinkets for personal adornment, so dear to her sex.

'Bijah, who had a true borderman's easy notions about personal neatness, "lowed he could git along with what he carried on his back."

"But," he added, "folks is bound to git grub-struck, whether school keeps or not; an' we'll want to keep shady till we git to Atchison, at least. We don't want to leave no broader trail than we kin help; so we can't stop at no first-class hotels, between hyere an' thar. So I'll tote the provinder fur my share."

This was not all he had to carry, as he soon showed.

Cass had suggested that he and Mart take their shot-guns, but 'Bijah had objected that they were not fit for the kind of work they were going to, and had promised to look out for that part of their outfit.

He now proved that he had made ample provision.

From the receptacle he drew forth a revolver and a bowie-knife each for Cass and Mart, and a pretty little six-shooter for Rose.

"Oh!" cried the girl, in mingled timidity and delight, "but I can't use that!"

"You'll larn," was 'Bijah's assurance. "An' it may stand ye in hand one o' these days. Whar we're goin' them things don't never come amiss."

Diving again into the hole where these things had been secreted, he drew forth two small breech-loading carbines, and a magazine rifle.

The former he gave to Cass and Mart.

"Well! well!" cried Cass. "That's a regular treasure-cave! But where did you get all of these things?"

"I've been layin' of 'em by," answered 'Bijah, "ag'in' the time when I'd have use fur 'em."

"They're beauties! And that's a handy fellow that you have."

"I mean to keep tally on the stock o' the Injuns I shoot," said 'Bijah, in an affected calm tone, which was belied by the glistening of his eyes.

"But these must have cost a little mint. We owe you something for them."

"We won't say nothin' about that. Jest you put a hole through that Hal Rountree fur me, ef he comes a-follerin' of us, an' we'll call it squar!"

"But, land o' Goshen! what are you going to do with all of those knives?"

For 'Bijah was slipping upon a belt a perfect armament of bowie-knives—half a dozen, at least.

"Waal," he explained, "ef you'll look back at all the fights you ever see, you'll find that the strength of a feller's body don't count, ef you kin only chill his nerve. Nine out o' ten is whipped by pure cheek. To be sure, with the tenth man you've got to git down to business an' wear him out with hard rubs."

"Now, it struck me ef I could manage to git shut o' them nine fellers without throwin' away no muscle on 'em, I'd be in better trim fur the tenth when I happened to snub up ag'in' him."

"But I should think you could save strength by not loading yourself down with bowie-knives and handle yourself better without them when you came upon your tenth man."

"It don't take much to tote them, an' they may come in handy even with the tenth man."

"But you can't use them all at once. I should think one would be enough of that sort of thing."

"Let's see about that," answered 'Bijah.

Going up to a tree, he jabbed the point of one of his knives into its trunk, and pinned a leaf to the spot by driving a twig through it into the incision.

Stepping back several paces, he threw his knives in succession at this target, plucking them from their sheaths with his left hand, and transferring them to his right hand to be thrown.

The rapidity and precision with which they flew after one another caused all the witnesses of this feat to cry out in astonishment and admiration.

"Why, when did you learn to do that?" exclaimed Cass.

"Oh, I've been a-savin' up ag'in' my gittin' to go to the mountains," replied 'Bijah, with suppressed satisfaction.

"You must have counted on it a long time."

"Ever since I kin remember, I reckon."

"And do you propose to fight men in that way?"

"I 'lowed as it was a mite off the common run, an' would set folks to blowin'. Thar ain't nothin' like havin' a lot to do yer blowin' fur ye."

'Bijah delivered this piece of philosophy modestly. It summed up years of observation on his part.

"It will be sure to give you a name of some sort," said Cass.

"That's jest it," replied 'Bijah. "It'll keep them nine what I told ye about from pesterin' me. I'd druther git along peaceable, if nine out o' ten o' my fights kin be skeered off by wind."

"That's the spirit of a true hero," laughed Cass. "The General Jackson was a man of peace."

"When thar wa'n't no business doin'!" supplemented 'Bijah, with a grin.

"But," he added, with a sudden assumption of briskness, "we hain't got no time to throw away on foolishness. We'll have to keep a-goin' right peart, ef we—"

He was about to continue—"want to keep ahead o' Jim Rountree." But it occurred to him not to add to Rose's anxiety; so he only busied himself in completing their preparations for immediate departure.

Avoiding the villages, they made their way to Atchison, where wagon-trains were fitting out for their long journey across the plains.

Here, leaving Rose and her brothers in hiding, 'Bijah went into the town to see what prospect there was of their being able to make a desirable connection with some train just about to start.

The place was a scene of stirring life. People from all parts of the Union were there thrown

together, to be fellow-voyagers for months, seeking a common goal through common dangers.

What stirred 'Bijah's blood was the swaggering independence of the plainsmen, who were to act as guides and scouts and hunters.

His admiration of them was so simple and undisguised that, coupled with the desirable qualities of his horse, it was sure to attract their attention.

"That ain't no slouch of a hoss you've got thar, stranger," was the salute of one of them.

"I'll gamble ye fur him."

"No you won't!" answered 'Bijah, promptly.

"Eh!" cried the plainsman, with a look of surprise at this decided retort. "You pan out better'n you indicate, an' that's a fact. How'll ye trade? This beast hyar o' mine's got Injun blood in him. Jest what you're lookin' fur, ef you're goin' out on the plain."

'Bijah glanced sidelong at the scrubby little broncho, and answered:

"I reckon I ain't huntin' Injun."

"But he jest naterally despises his relations!" the scout hastened to add. "You'd orter see him git over the ground once, with a pack o' p'izon Sioux behind him."

"I do admire to see man or hoss stick to his own folks," said 'Bijah, slowly. "Him an' me wouldn't gee, nowadays."

And he patted Jin affectionately.

Seeing that he could not get the advantage of this simple-looking tenderfoot, the scout took a liking to him.

"I tell ye what it is, stranger," he said, "you do as I say an' you'll come out ahead. Don't you tie to none o' the ornery bucks ye see cavortin' around hyar. They'll cheat you out o' yer eye-teeth, an' lie to ye jest to keep their hands in. But ef you want to go to whar the gold lays right on top o' the y'arth, jest a-cryin' to have somebody come along an' pick it up, you light out hot-foot after Cap Collins. He ain't forty-eight hours ahead o' you, an' ye kin pick him up easy. Tell him as Sam Parker—Topeka Sam; everybody knows me—wants him to use ye well, an' you'll find him as white a man as ye want to know."

"Thar's only one thing ye want to look out fur. Cap, he's breakin' a bran'-new trail, whar he 'lows to git grass an' water to beat the land o' Canaan all holler; an' ef Cap don't know whar grass grows an' water runs between hyar an' the foothills, then thar don't no livin' critter stand in shoe-leather what does. But I'll give ye the p'int so's ye can't miss the spot whar he leaves the ole rout; an' ef you can't foller the trail what he leaves acrost the perrairie, I'll lend ye a pair o' leather goggles what I invented an' patented myself, expressly fur blind tender-feet."

Topeka Sam then described the landmarks so clearly that no one could well miss the way.

'Bijah thanked his new friend with an air as if he took all this as law and gospel truth; but he was at pains to make careful inquiry about Captain Collins before setting out on what might be a wild-goose chase.

However, everybody had the same good word for the captain of the wagon-train; so 'Bijah concluded to try to join him.

"It's jest what we're after, if he's half as good as they say," he said to Cass, when making his report. "I've sifted them fellers purty fine, an' I reckon we couldn't do no better ef we had our pick. What we don't want, is not to hang around hyer no longer'n we kin help; an' ef we kin catch this feller, nobody'll know about you boys an' Rosy."

"There's another point in favor of this plan," seconded Cass. "If anybody follows us, and don't know of our being with Captain Collins, they will follow the regular route, and so miss us altogether."

Rose was rather the worse for wear, after the hardships of her flight thus far, but she bravely assented to the extra riding necessary to overtake the wagon-train before it had got so far as to make their following it without a guide hazardous.

"We kin make three days' journey to their one," said 'Bijah. "An' after we git among 'em, some kind soul will be only too glad to let Rosy have a ride in a wagon."

"Then you kin rest all you want to," he added, addressing the girl with his never-failing grin of admiration.

It's queer how circumstances alter cases! Rose did not resent this. On the contrary, she now liked 'Bijah immensely, and was so frank in showing her gratitude and trust, that she made his grin often break into a laugh of delight.

They had no difficulty in following the broad trail of the wagon-train across the otherwise trackless prairie, and overtook it on the second day.

As from the crest of a prairie-swell 'Bijah caught sight of the long, straggling line of tilt-covered wagons halted for the noon rest, and the stock scattered on either side, he swung his hat with a yell of exultation, in a twinkling making his companions forget their weariness.

They were objects of scarcely less interest to the people of the wagon-train, who flocked about them as they approached.

But 'Bijah was not taking everybody and any-

body into his confidence. He asked for Captain Collins.

Cap was at the forward end of the train, and before the fugitives could seek him an incident happened which had a decided bearing upon their future adventures.

Everybody's attention was attracted by a great whooping and yelling, and all turned to see a buckskin-clad plainsman bearing down upon them at a reckless gallop, slatting his horse with his bat, and making him buck with the spur.

Into the crowd he tore, making those on foot scamper to get out of his way.

The women and little girls, of whom several had come from the nearest wagons to inspect the new-comers, screamed as they fled, like a flock of frightened geese.

The boys—and the irrepressible small boy is everywhere—yelled in delight at the excitement.

There were indignant protests from men who thought of the safety of wives and daughters, and laughter from others who had no such immediate care.

At sight of Rose the reckless rider drew his horse abruptly on his haunches, and uttered a gruff snort of surprise.

"Waal!"

Then he sat and stared at her with mouth agape for a moment, his ill-favored phiz gradually broadening with a grin of wonder, admiration and curiosity.

It was plain that the fellow was pretty well under the influence of liquor. His eyes were bloodshot, and he sat unsteadily in the saddle.

Under the most favorable conditions, he was one well fitted to startle a young girl who found herself the object of his admiration.

With straight, black hair and a swarthy complexion, he looked not unlike a half-breed Indian; and his coal-black eyes had an intensity of gaze that had set to tingling the nerves of men who passed for fairly plucky.

"Waal, I swear!" he ejaculated. "This hyar's the meat I've been lookin' fur, away 'long back."

As he spoke, he touched his horse with the spur, and the animal, already trembling with nervous excitement, leaped forward with an abruptness that frightened Rose more than ever.

"Oh, Cass!" she cried, hastily drawing rein to turn from the advancing ruffian.

CHAPTER X.

BLACK BILL.

BOTH Cass and 'Bijah were in advance, anxiously pressing forward to see the master of the wagon-train.

Their whole party securely mounted, neither had been diverted from their immediate business by the approach of the plainsman.

They turned at Rose's cry, but were too far away to interpose between her and her persecutor.

"Don't you be skeered o' me, my pretty!" cried the plainsman, grinning at Rose's consternation. "I ain't harnsome—he!" and he made a grimace that corroborated his statement—"and I've got a bad yawp—whoop!" bellowing forth a yell that made Rose's heart leap into her throat—"but I'm a kitten fur play."

Mart was on the wrong side of Rose to interpose his horse; but, though as yet too unfamiliar with weapons to think of them as a first resort, he proved that he was not wanting in pluck.

"Let my sister alone!" he cried with blazing eyes, striving to rein his horse back of Rose's, so that he could charge the advancing ruffian.

Cass grew suddenly white with fury. To have a new enemy spring up at the very point where alone there appeared to be a chance to escape their other persecutors, maddened him.

Without a word, he swung his carbine round from his back, and reached to lift the strap over his head.

But 'Bijah, who seemed never to lose his head, gave the weapon a push that sent it back to place, and so gaining time to interpose before Cass's hot head led him into an irreparable indiscretion, shouted:

"Hi, thar, mister man! What air ye about?"

The drunken plainsman turned his head to look at 'Bijah, only to retort:

"Young feller, go West!"

He then turned again to continue his pursuit of Rose, who by this time had got her horse in full flight, though with so little start that the plainsman could almost have reached her horse's crupper, as he bent forward in anticipation of passing his arm about her waist.

'Bijah knew that, in the very presence of so many, there was no chance of any real harm to Rose, even if the plainsman had meant it for more than a drunken lark. Therefore there was no need for the use of deadly weapons in her defense.

At the same time he was enraged that one who was so sacred to him should be exposed to such horse-play.

All his life had been passed among men who did not handle one another with gloves, even in sport. So he did not hesitate to use vigorous means to bring this drunken ruffian to his senses.

Plucking a bowie from his belt, he hurled it with unerring aim at the fellow's head, keeling him out of the saddle as neatly as if with a bullet.

"Limerick lightnin'!" cried one of the spectators. "He's druv' the knife clean through his head!"

Again the women screamed, and men run shouting to the spot where the fallen plainsman lay motionless.

'Bijah reached his side before any one else, leaped from the saddle, and picking up his bowie from the grass, held its glittering blade up to view.

"Don't you worry about him!" he said to those who gathered about him with looks of horror and ejaculations of condemnation. "I could 'a' let daylight into that fool-head of his'n ef I'd been a-mind to, but I 'lowed as it 'u'd be a pity to turn the aidge o' good steel on his thick skull. So I jest tapped him with the butt-end o' this, by way of a gentle hint that we hain't no notion o' his foolishness; an' ef he hain't broke his neck a-fallin', you'll find he ain't hurt none to speak of. Ef he has, it's his own fault. He hadn't no call fur to be fallin' in that thar kind o' way. I reckon, gents, you hain't none o' you got nothin' to say ag'in' that."

He stood among them, pale, yet fearlessly erect, his eyes glittering, his nostrils quivering.

They stared at him in astonishment, bewildered by this sudden transition.

A moment ago they had regarded him as a half-foolish gawky, quite secondary to Cass; but now he had the appearance of a man whom the best of them might hesitate to challenge.

"Hit 'im with the butt-end o' that!" exclaimed one. "Waal, it's a lucky thing fur him! I lay you couldn't do it twic't runnin'."

"Oh, I've throwed a toad-stabber before now!" answered 'Bijah, returning the weapon carelessly to his belt.

"Waal, you ain't no 'prentice hand at it, pard, ef you kin handle them things in that way," observed another.

"That's my opinion," said a voice, cheerily good-natured now, but with a clear ring that suggested the habit of command.

All turned as a horseman pressed his way into the crowd.

At a glance 'Bijah guessed that this was Captain Collins.

"What's the row hyar?" asked the captain, for it was indeed he.

"That fellow of yours insulted my sister!" cried Cass hotly.

Cap Collins looked at the speaker with a suspicion of a smile puckering the corners of his eyes, though his mouth was grave.

"I reckon he didn't 'low that she had so many an' such wide-awake backers," he said slowly.

"Well, he'll find that she has enough!" retorted Cass, who didn't cool off quickly—"he or anybody else!"

"I reckon he wa'n't himself," interposed 'Bijah, pacifically; "an' he didn't mean it fur nothin' but frolickin'. But when he's got any frolickin' o' that kind on hand, he wants to always count in his uncle."

By this time the fallen plainsman was regaining his scattered wits, and pushing back those who knelt about him, he sat up and stared at 'Bijah and the wagon-master.

"Hain't you got over your drunk yet, Black Bill?" asked the captain sternly.

Bill, who was but slowly recovering from bewilderment, wagged his head like a dazed buffalo, and snorted:

"Wagh!"

Then he answered:

"I reckon I ain't so drunk as I was."

Finally, after another slight pause, he looked about in the faces of those standing around him and asked:

"Who laid me out hyar?"

No one presumed to answer him in the presence of Cap Collins, though 'Bijah looked at him calmly.

Cap himself said:

"It don't make any difference who laid you out. We ain't done with you yet. Go for'ard an' report yourself under arrest, and I'll look after your case presently."

Bill got upon his legs heavily, and shook himself. Then he looked about, till his eyes rested upon the pale face of the subject of his persecution.

Rose had ridden back, and now sat her horse close beside Cass, Mart taking his place on the other side of her.

He looked as if, had his body been as big as his soul, he would have withstood all of her enemies single-handed.

"I hope the leetle lady don't bear no malice," said Bill, apologetically. "I'm a blame fool, an' that's a fact. But I didn't mean her no harm. 'Pon me soul, I didn't."

"Take yourself off, then," commanded Cap Collins. "The less we hyear out o' you jest now the better show you'll have for the future."

"All right, cap'n—all right, sir," responded the culprit, submissively.

And receiving his horse from a comrade who had caught the animal, he rode away toward the fore end of the wagon-train.

Cap Collins's eye had been caught by Rose

Crawford's delicate beauty, as nobody ever failed to be. Like all brave men, he had a weakness for just this sort of clinging, feminine dependence.

"You needn't to let the cavortin' around o' that drunken fool trouble you," he said, bringing the roses back to her cheeks by his glance. "I'll put him through such a course of sprouts for this that he'll—"

"Oh," interposed Rose, "I hope you will let him off this time. He didn't mean anything unkind by it. He said so."

"Waal, I sha'n't mean anything unkind, either; but I reckon he'll have cause to remember this as long as you do."

Then, turning to Cass and 'Bijah:

"But what kin we do fur you, gents? I reckon this ain't a pleasure trip, jest to bid us good-bay."

"No," answered 'Bijah. "Kin we see you a minute, out o' this crowd?"

"You bet you kin," replied Cap Collins, promptly.

A touch on the rein directed his horse apart from the curious spectators, and 'Bijah and his party followed.

'Bijah had not let a word, a look, or a gesture of the wagon-master escape him, from the moment of his appearance.

In that short interval he had taken the measure of the man, and he now adopted the wisest course, making a clean statement of the case.

Captain Collins proved to be a right good fellow. He stared in surprise at this proposed addition to his train, and looked at the party suspiciously, yet with a twinkle of fun in his eye.

"A passel o' runaways, eh?" he said. "Waal, what am I to do ef a sheriff comes after ye? I'm fur law an' order, myself—especially when the law is of my own makin', an' I give the order!"

"We'll obey your orders," Cass hastened to interpose.

"If you know what's well fur ye!" laughed Cap Collins, with a side shake of his head.

"An' we was honest enough to tell you how the land laid; so you can't say we tried to take you in," added 'Bijah.

"I'm!" replied the captain, looking at the speaker with a shrewd smile. "You may have been long-headed enough to know that the thing was likely to out anyway, in a few days, when it would be handy to have got in the first word with me."

"I thought you looked as if you'd stand by honest folks ag'in' rogues, sheriff or no sheriff; or you bet your sweet life I wouldn't have told you anything about it, ef we had to cross the plains all by ourselves!" declared 'Bijah, with such decisiveness that the wagon-master looked at him in surprise.

"Waal," he said, "you speak up right peart, an' no mistake."

He was not insensible to the compliment conveyed in 'Bijah's words. And 'Bijah had touched him in just the right spot.

He was in favor of strong government, as he said, but he had a borderman's suspicions of the formal government of a regularly constituted state.

"Red tape, an' lyin' attorneys," he was wont to say, "I do despise!"

Now he looked at the young people, and scratched his head reflectively.

"I'll tell you what," he said presently, "this hyar's a queer tale, but I take stock in you—I do so."

His eyes rested upon Rose's blushing face. He might have sought the continent over and failed to find a more truthful one, or one of more winning beauty.

"I take stock in you!" he repeated, nodding his head approvingly, "an' I'll stand by you the best I know how. If I don't take you through to the Beth you're lookin' fur, it'll be because I find them pen-an'-ink chaps more than a match fur me!"

"Oh, sir! we can never be grateful enough to you!" broke in Rose, her gratitude overcoming her timidity. "We shall owe you everything!"

"I'll collect at the end o' the rout!" said Cap Collins, with a significant twinkle in his eye.

Miss Rose blushed divinely, but she smiled nevertheless.

Cap Collins was a handsome man, and old enough not to be on the lovers' list.

He kept his eye on her pretty face while he pondered something—evidently what course it would be most prudent to pursue.

So much depended on his decision that the others waited with hated breath.

"You look tired," he observed to Rose, noting the effects of her unwonted exertions with a kindly eye. "I wish I could put you in the wagon along with Mrs. Chester. She's a good soul, an' would use ye well. But I've a notion that you haven't hyeared the last o' Jim Rountree. I've hyeared tell of him, an' I reckon he lets go hard. If he was to send a sheriff after you, he could snake you out o' hyar easy, or put me in a hopple fur the next time I come to Atchison."

"Oh, don't let us get you into trouble!" cried Rose, anxiously.

But there was a tremor in her voice, and, without intending to, she looked at him so ap-

pealingly—for she liked him—that he felt as if he would like to face all the sheriffs in Kansas and Missouri combined, in her defense.

"Don't you worry, my dear," he said. "I reckon, when he can read his title cl'ar, Tom Collins don't take water fur no two-legged man between sun-up and sun-down, unless his hide is proof ag'in' good honest powder an' ball. If I say I'll pull you through, you bet your sweet eyes I'll pull you through!"

"Say it, then!" pleaded Rose, with a bewitching smile.

"I do say it, so help me Bob!" cried the captain, striking his fist into his palm.

The thud of scampering hoofs drew his attention to a horseman who was bearing down upon the wagon train on the wings of the wind.

"That's the boy I'm a-lookin' fur!" he declared; and snatching off his hat swung it around his head with a summoning shout.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CENTAUR OF THE PLAINS.

THE new-comer was a young fellow of not more than two or three and twenty, in all the glory and vigor of early manhood.

He had a frame that combined activity with endurance, and his clear skin, mantled with the red tide of bounding blood, indicated the health that knows neither weariness nor pain.

Dressed in a full suit of buckskin, and crowned with a soft felt hat, the rider had the flowing locks of the cavaliers of the plains.

About his waist was a belt filled with a row of cartridges held in loops, save where the sheaths of revolvers and bowie were strung upon it.

In his right hand he carried a finely-finished silver-mounted repeating rifle.

He shouted in response to Cap Collins's hail, and bore straight down to where he stood.

"Hallo, Bareback Buck!" cried Cap Collins as the young fellow came up.

"Hallo, yerself!" was the hearty response.

But, though he spoke to the wagon-master, Bareback Buck's eyes were fixed upon Rose Crawford's face with a gaze of rapt astonishment and admiration.

We say gaze, not stare; for the look was thoroughly respectful.

The truth was, that Buck had never seen a girl of such delicate loveliness as Rose. Without himself knowing it, he was a young man of extremely fastidious taste, and the kind of women he had met had never quite satisfied him.

"Shade of Belshazzar!" he said to himself, "do they have women like that in the States? Not many, I'll bet my hoss!"

So profoundly was he affected by this vision of loveliness, the realization, and more, of the vague imaginings that had haunted him, that it did not occur to him that the modest little maiden might easily be looked out of countenance, till he saw the blood streaming over her face, as she dropped her eyes before his.

Then a blush as marked as hers swept to his temples, and as he turned his eyes to Cap Collins and spoke to him, his voice was unsteady with embarrassment.

As he halted the magnificent stallion he bestrode, every one saw to what he owed his sobriquet. No saddle chafed the withers of that king of his race; no bit galled his mouth. A broad red girth bound a folded gray army-blanket to his sleek black body; but other than that, nothing fashioned by the hand of man marked him with the badge of servitude.

He obeyed the word of command, and seemed to have no will save that of his master, or, rather, comrade; for, with an affection almost if not quite like that he would have borne one of his own species, Buck had named the noble animal Pard, and the best of pards they were.

"Spur!" he had cried, when the use of that instrument of torture had once been suggested.

"Would you use a spur to your sweetheart?"

Indeed, there was no need of anything of the kind.

"Up, Pard!—now!" was enough to make the intelligent animal leap anything that equine thews and sinews were equal to.

"Bareback Buck and Pard!—the Centaur of the Plains!" was Cap Collins's introduction, as he grasped Buck's hand and presented him to the party.

"This young lady," he went on, addressing Buck in turn, "is Miss Rose Crawford. These two are her brothers. And this hyar is—waa, I'm blessed if I know who!"

"'Bijah," was 'Bijah's self-introduction.

"Bowie-Knife 'Bijah," said Cap Collins, with an amused glance at the armament of "Mississippi tooth-picks."

'Bijah grinned, and, turning to Cass, said:

"That's the name you 'lowed I'd be fur git-tin'."

"Nobody else is apt to be furgittin' it!" laughed Buck, to cover the embarrassment with which he acknowledged Rose's timid bow.

"Buck," interposed the wagon-master, turning at once to business, "if you was an angel, you couldn't have dropped down on us when we wanted you worse."

"I reckon thar ain't anything particularly

angelic about me," replied Buck. "But you can't be gladder to see me than I am to see you, ole man."

"Waal, that's sayin' a good deal. But I'd like to know what wind blew you this way, anyhow."

"I was at Atchison, and hearing that you wasn't much more than three days out, I didn't stop. That's all."

Cap Collins looked mighty well pleased by this quiet evidence of attachment.

"You'd 'a' been money out o' pocket if you had stopped!" he said, with a twinkle in his eye; for the glance exchanged by Rose and Buck had not escaped his observation, as indeed very little that went on in his vicinity ever did.

"If I had gone back on you, Pard wouldn't have had it," replied Buck, neatly turning the point of the captain's lance.

"Waal, you're jest in time to get me out of a hole," said the wagon-master.

"You know that you own me, when it comes to that," answered Buck, heartily.

Thereupon Cap Collins told him the story of the party that had so unexpectedly claimed his protection.

"I reckon you'd better know all about it," he concluded; "for I look to you to keep 'em out o' the clutches of any scalawag that comes huntin' of 'em. This thing would be too good to go through without a close brush. You can't drap Jim Rountree so easy, my way o' thinkin'."

"Oh, I can drop him easy enough, if he comes nosin' around whar he ain't wanted!" declared Buck, with a sudden determined sparkle in his eye.

"But the trick is to git shut of him without droppin' him that way," suggested the captain.

"I reckon that's so," assented Buck, lowering his voice, with a quick apprehension of the wagon-master's meaning.

It wouldn't do to cause that angelic creature any haunting memories.

"I allow that's nothin' but to run for it," said the captain. "You take the back track to Seven Mile Creek, an' then take the water south, an' join me ag'in whenever you think it's all serene. I'll stave off anything that follers me. But the fairer things look, the more show we'll have o' throwin' dust in the eyes of Mr. Sheriff, ef he puts in his bid."

"You'll have the— Now I think of it," said Buck, hastily interrupting himself, "is our ole side-pard, Jake Bogardus, in the corral?"

He looked straight into Cap Collins's eyes as he made this inquiry.

Cap, who had never heard of any such person before, side-pard or anything else, started, dropped his jaw just sufficiently for a suspicious eyes to have detected, and then recovering himself so cleverly that no one but Buck noticed his momentary disconcertion, he answered:

"Come right along; an' ef I kin git him to go along with you, I reckon he won't be in the way."

Thereupon the men turned toward the parked wagons, leaving our friends to await their return.

"What's the row?" asked Cap, the moment he could speak without being overheard.

"You're going to have a chance to stand off that sheriff—that's all. And I came near blurtin' out before—they all."

The word "her" had trembled on Bareback Buck's lips, which was the reason of his just perceptible halt.

"You've seen him?" asked Cap.

"Two chaps that I'll gamble on were making inquiries about just such a party as this, back at Atchison. Nobody had seen the girl; but they must have got a description of our friend o' the bowie-knives; for I saw them following me out o' the place. If they camped last night, as is most likely, you won't hear from them for another twenty-four hours. Anyway, Pard could distance them so's to leave us time to turn round before they put in an appearance."

"You must run the party down the creek, then, and that without delay."

"Give me the rout', and hand them over to me."

"You shall have not only the rout', but a pack-mule—or a hoss, if you like it better—with grub, to see you through."

"Make it a hoss, Cap, an' a good one. We may have some runnin' to do, an' I don't want to lose my commissariat."

It took but a short time for all necessary preparations, and then the two returned to the anxious fugitives.

"In turnin' you over to Bareback Buck," said Cap Collins, "I feel to say you're safer under him than if it was myself. You do what he says, an' he'll pull you through if it's in mortal man to do it."

"You sha'n't lose anything by this, Captain Collins," declared Cass, wringing the wagon-master's hand with a humidity of the eyes that showed that gratitude had formed a lump in his throat. "I ain't rich now, but if I live, I'll work my fingers to the bone—"

"I reckon not, sonny!" laughed Cap. "If I'm anythin' at readin' the sign o' human nater, you will make your way fast enough in the

mountains. When you strike a bonanza, we'll talk about squarin' accounts. Till then, I'll enter it all up ag'in' your sister. She an' me has got an open account already."

Rose blushed as she gave the teasing captain her hand, and there was downright liking in the shy eyes that she lifted timidly to his twinkling ones.

Mart was taken up with Buck's horse, Pard.

"If I had a horse like that, I shouldn't be afraid of Jim Rountree catchin' me!" he declared.

"It'll be a long time before you or anybody else has a hoss like that thar!" exclaimed 'Bijah.

"How'll you trade?" asked Buck, looking at 'Bijah with a smile which showed that he had not yet fairly sized him up.

"I 'lowed to have some purty middlin' hosses," answered 'Bijah; "but I'm weepin' to give you ary two o' mine for that'n."

"Two of yours?" repeated Buck, opening his eyes slightly with surprise.

"They won't be mine till we git shut o' Jim Rountree," replied 'Bijah, with a peculiar grin.

"If you want three good hosses fur your one, we'll talk about it later."

"Waal, I reckon you know somethin' about hoss-flesh, anyway," declared Buck, not insensible to this compliment to Pard. "Howsomever, I reckon we'd better be movin', if we're goin' to."

But before taking leave, Rose once more urged upon Cap Collins lenity toward Black Bill.

"If I am to cross the plains with you," she pleaded, with winning gentleness, "I want to be the best of friends with everybody. Don't you think he will be all the more likely to treat me kindly in the future, if he sees that I forgive him freely now?"

"He'd be a hard case if he could hyear you beggin' him off, an' use you 'll after it. Wal, I'll see what kin be done about it."

Then they set out, riding rapidly back over the trail left by the wagon-train, till they came to a creek flowing southward across it.

This they entered, and followed it till twilight necessitated an abandonment of its treacherous bottom.

To Cass's surprise, instead of leaving the stream on its western bank, Bareback Buck turned toward the east.

"Why!" ejaculated the boy, "aren't we going back to rejoin Captain Collins?"

"Certainly," answered Buck, smiling.

"Then, what does this mean? I can't be turned round. This creek certainly runs south."

"Undoubtedly."

"Then we are going eastward."

"Your geographical knowledge couldn't be improved."

"Well, then?"

"Have you lived to your time of life without learning that, in some circumstances, the longest way round is the shortest way home?"

Cass laughed.

"When you're going home with your best girl? so they say."

"But you don't know from personal experience? Ah, there!"

"At any rate," protested Cass, flushing consciously, "this isn't a parallel case."

"It is in this particular," insisted Bareback Buck. "The quickest way to get back to Cap, is to send that sheriff off on a blind."

"All right. I'll leave it all to you."

"An' I'll make it solid, if I have ordinary good luck."

They were now miles away from the wagon train, and noting Rose's weariness, Bareback Buck decided upon a halt when they had put a mile between them and the creek.

It was Buck who assisted Rose to dismount. Somehow 'Bijah had a notion that his services would not be as acceptable as when he had anticipated Hal Rountree in helping her into the saddle.

"If you'll walk about a big while we're getting supper ready," said Buck, "you'll find that you'll sleep better after your long ride."

Rose thanked him, and took his advice. She had not realized how much she was cramped till she tried to walk. But it benefited her greatly.

The chaparral in which they were encamped was too small for any risk of getting lost; and though she went to its borders and made a circuit of it, gazing out over the darkening prairie and up at the purple heavens in which the stars were coming out with a vividness and lambency that made them seem almost within gunshot, she could hear Bareback Buck's musical whistle all the while.

He was not whistling a tune, but imitating the notes of birds he had heard on the Pacific Slope, and in the basin of old Missouri.

The low, liquid sounds had something in them that suggested that the whistler was dreaming pleasantly over his work, and Rose caught herself sighing softly, and then felt her cheeks grow hot as she wondered how she could have dreamed as she did, that first night after seeing Hal Rountree.

Presently the whistling ceased and Buck's voice reached her.

"Now, Miss Rose!"

She went into the camp, and shyly accepted the daintiest morsels that Buck had reserved for her.

Addressing her directly only once in a while, yet never losing sight of her comfort, Buck managed to make that the pleasantest meal she had partaken of since the old holiday gatherings, before her orphanage.

Buck told a good story, and told it well, with one peculiarity, that he never made himself the hero of the yarn. It was always some friend of his who had done the daring deed, or made the hairbreadth escape.

Many a time in her after acquaintance with him Rose reflected that he must make friends wherever he went, to have so many; but of them all he spoke of no one so highly as Cap Collins.

After supper he said to her laughingly:

"We don't pretend to run a first-class hotel, but we don't allow ladies to sleep on the floor at the Prairie Belle. This, if you will be pleased to occupy it, is your bed; and I hope you will enjoy it for the next six hours."

As he spoke, he showed her a hammock which he had improvised out of a blanket, slinging it between two saplings. So as to shelter it above and on the sides from which the cool night wind came, another blanket was stretched by its four corners.

"Oh, you are too kind!" murmured the girl, lifting timid eyes to his face.

"Cap Collins swore he'd lay me out if I didn't use you well," replied Buck. "So I shall have to try to win a favorable report from you when I turn you over to him again."

"It will be very favorable, I'm sure!" responded the girl, in a still softer cadence of voice.

Buck lifted his hat gracefully, and bade her good-night, then walked briskly away to arrange for the night-watch.

She was still looking after him when she saw Mart coming toward her, and turned quickly to busy herself about the hammock.

Mart helped her into it, and tucked her in closely, and then, as he bent for a good-night kiss, he said, with a boy's outspoken admiration:

"Sis, ain't he a hummer, though?"

She did not answer him in words, but threw her arms about his neck and kissed him with a warmth that was rather unusual even for her; and Mart had been her "baby" ever since their mother died.

"Hal Rountree ain't—"

But Master Mart got no further.

"Don't mention Hal Rountree!" she burst forth, now finding voice. "I hate him!"

Mart, for his part, still had a qualified admiration for Hal, in spite of his rascality; but he was willing to let the matter drop, as he curled up in his blanket on the ground beside his sister's hammock. Truth to tell, he was too sleepy to institute a nice comparison between Buck and Hal.

He added only one last remark before "dropping off."

"There ain't another horse like his in this wide world, and I know it! He's turned him loose out on the prairie, and says he's his watch-dog. Don't I wish he belonged to me, though!—or one side of him!"

This was Mart's way of making a strong case of it.

But Buck did not depend wholly on his "watch-dog." If he had been alone he would have done so, knowing that, after having eaten his fill, the faithful beast would not sleep anywhere but close beside his pard.

So used was Buck to this, that it never roused him, if he was particularly tired, when Pard came to lie down almost within reach of his hand, and at other times only long enough to move so as to lay his head on his horse's flank.

Then these two pards, more loving than most brothers, would sleep peacefully together, Pard never stirring if he woke first, unless he was roused by some sound that alarmed him. In that case, he would not betray their position by snorting or starting up, but would only lift his head, and gently nudge Buck with his muzzle.

A touch of his pard's band would apprise him that Buck was on the alert, and he would lie still till commanded to rise, or assured that all was right by a word and Buck's nestling back to rest, when he would compose himself to sleep again in perfect confidence.

So man and horse had trusted each other for the past three years.

But now Buck had a precious charge with whose safety he would not trust even his well-tried pard.

When 'Bijah offered to take the watch, Buck looked at him dubiously.

"If I hadn't been on the stretch for three or four nights," he said, "I'd run the thing myself. But I ought to have a snooze till mid-night, at any rate. And then, if we are going to hear from any unwelcome gentlemen, it probably won't be before to-morrow night, at the nearest. How do you feel, Cass?"

"I've been resting up for the past seventeen years," replied Cass, adopting the braggadocio style of speech that is so common on the border.

"I reckon I sha'n't need to prop my eyes open for an hour or two."

Buck smiled.

"I reckon we'll let you try it," he answered. "But look sharp! It's the easiest thing in the world to fool yourself."

"I sha'n't have to lie down to it here in the woods," said Cass, airing his knowledge of scouting by only hinting at it; "and I never was a hand to sleep standing."

"Do you know when it's midnight?" asked Buck, only a slight contraction of his eyelids betraying his amusement at this boyishness.

"I've been out a few times when my mother didn't know it!" was all that Cass deigned to reply.

"Waal, call me then, if I don't come round of my own accord, and I'll relieve you."

"Can you wake up any time you want to?" asked Cass, looking at Buck with keen interest.

"Oh, I can do a little that way," admitted Buck, modestly, "but Cap Collins would jest make you weep to hear him tell off the time with his eyes shut."

Cass went to his post, and in a moment the camp was as still as if there were not a human being within the rim of the horizon.

Not so with the rest of animated nature. Scarcely had the darkness fallen, when the nightly concert began.

Cass had never heard such a medley of sounds. He recognized some of the bird calls, but it was a nopeless task to try to distinguish the various noises of insect life. Then there was howling and barking and chattering and laughing, by animals of whose names and natures he was equally ignorant, till poor Cass began to feel that a haunted house would be an agreeable change from that prairie chaparral.

At first he began to recall all the stories he had heard of travelers who, attacked by wolves, had scattered them by throwing fire-brands into their midst.

Rose and Mart and 'Bijah might sleep through such a racket, tired out as they were, with some excuse; but he thought, with some resentment, that an old hand like Bareback Buck ought not to lie like a log, leaving him the entire responsibility of looking out for the safety of the camp at so critical a moment.

Then it occurred to him that Indians sometimes mimic the cries of coyotes when stealing upon a sleeping camp; and cold chills began to course up and down his back, as he strained his eyes to peer into the darkness in search of some skulking form.

There it was—there! It was gone!

His knees beginning to tremble under him, Cass cocked his carbine and held it in readiness at his hip, resolved to let daylight through at least one sneaking Sioux and Cheyenne before he underwent the agreeable process of having his scalp lifted!

The first time one shoots at a human being, even a savage, it is not done very collectedly; and if the truth must out, Cass was "wild." He was no longer accountable for what he did or left undone. He was afraid to rouse his friends by calling to them, lest his shout be followed by a chorus of Indian yells. He was afraid to move from the spot, or lose the chance of seeing that skulking shadow when next it appeared.

He thought of Rose, and dreaded to precipitate her fate. But—

There! There!

Up went his rifle, but at the instant of firing a low voice restrained him.

"Hold on, my Christian friend! We don't throw away good powder and ball like that on the prairie."

CHAPTER XII.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

"I AIN'T swoopin' that thar boss, Lightnin' Bug, fur no rag like this hyar," declared Lish Losy, looking with disdain upon the questionable equivalent his wards had left him.

In his rage he would have thrown it into the fire, but it occurred to him that, if the worst came, he might have to fight Judge Rountree for the value of the horse, and this was the only evidence of his claim that he could bring.

So he put it up on the clock-shelf, and set out to join the sheriff whom the judge had agreed to send with him to recover the fugitives.

This man, Jake Fogg by name, was a creature of the judge's, and not a little dirty work had he done for his master at one time and another.

A sarcastic attorney, who was smarting under some of the judge's sharp practice, had dubbed him Jim Rountree's jackal, adding that, though he usually sailed under legal colors, it was chiefly under the Black Roger that he "got his work in."

The sheriff was short and stocky in build, with a round, bullet head, and a protruding, pugnacious jaw, accentuated by a pointed chin-whisker that stood out horizontally when he carried his nose in the air.

He had wicked little black eyes, pig-like in their cold-blooded selfishness and unfeeling cruelty; and his whole physiognomy showed that in him it was hard to draw the line between the rogue and the taker of rogues.

Without taking this fellow into his confidence further than was necessary—that is to say,

merely telling him that the popular supposition that his brother Hal was concerned in the flight of Lish Losy's wards was an error—Judge Rountree gave him his instructions to arrest the whole party as quietly as possible, 'Bijah resting under the charge of having abducted minors from their legal guardians.

As there was no other place for them to go, the judge took it for granted that they would try to make their way to their sister Beth, and so sent his jackal directly to Atchison, the nearest point at which wagon-trains fitted out for their journey across the Great Plains.

Inquiry along the route failed to discover any trace of the fugitives. They had not gone through a single village.

Even at Atchison, nothing had been seen of Rose or the boys, but a description of 'Bijah elicited the reply:

"Now look a-hyar, mister, a cub like that thar was hangin' around byar only day 'fore yistiddy—he was so!"

"Ah!" said Jake Fogg to himself, with quiet satisfaction, "we're pickin' of 'em up. We've got in a day on 'em so fur."

"Now, landlord!" he asked aloud, "what do you 'low has happened to that chap? He didn't come chinnin' you—"

"Hold on! Dog my ole gizzard ef I didn't jest naterally see him buzzin' somebody right hyar in this hyar blazin' town. Who in Cain—"

The landlord jerked off his hat and thumped his head with a frown of impatience.

"I see sich a blame lot o' roosters cavortin' around," he began again, apologetically.

Jake Fogg refilled the landlord's glass and observed encouragingly:

"I've disremembered things myself."

The landlord went to the door of his saloon and looked out over the scene of busy humanity, to chance upon something that would recall the passing spectacle that had escaped him.

"Hey! hol thar's the snoozer now. I knowed it was some dog-gone straddlin' rooster that hadn't no— Oh, yes! oh, yes! Sam Parker. Topeka!"

"Hold on!" cried the sheriff, with the caution natural to a detective. "Let me see him first."

But it was too late. Topeka Sam was swinging his hat in response to the hail, and shouting back:

"Whoop-la! I'm with ye, me boy!"

"Ef his nibs han't washed everythin' clean through his sluice-box too quick fur to deposit—an' you bet he hain't been sufferin' none fur whisky sence he's been in these hyar diggin's," said the landlord—"I reckon he kin put ye on to what you're after ef anybody kin."

"Pardner," interposed the sheriff, speaking hurriedly, and dropping his voice to a confidential tone, "you know this man?"

"Waal, I should say I did," answered the landlord, with a stare of surprise at the question.

"Know him well?" persisted Fogg.

"I ought to."

"So as to call him a friend?"

"Waal, sir, we've gambled together, an' we've got drunk together. We've never bunked together yit, an' when I want money I don't put my hand in his pocket as if it was my own. But—"

"That will do. If he stands me off—as he may take a notion to do, ye know—will you engage to find out what I want to know of him, an' give me the straight tip? Fur money, ye understand. I'm byar on business. Speak quick. I don't want him to drop to your stand-in in with me."

"What is it worth to you?" asked the landlord, befraying no particular hurry.

Jake Fogg saw at once that he had made a mistake. He knew, without being told, that he would have to pay for his information if Topeka Sam was not too drunk to understand a signal from the landlord.

But then, he had a double assurance that he would eventually get it, if Sam was not too drunk to remember.

So he replied:

"We'll dicker when thar's somethin' to sell."

A moment afterward, Sam came swaggering up.

"Waal, ole man!" he cried, slapping the landlord on the shoulder with one hand, while giving him a hearty shake with the other, "how's how, anyhow? 'Pears like I always fetch up at this hole, no matter whar I'm a-goin', or which way I set out fur to go thar! That's so, s'elp me!"

"Waal, whar d'ye want to go better'n this hyar, pard?"

"Nowhar, sir!—nowhar on the top side o' this hyar bloomin' y'arth! When I hyar your bail, I says, says I: 'Thar's the reg'lar ole stampin'-ground! She looms up over the perrairie every time a man gits dry, an' now an' ag'in between whiles!'"

"Waal, pard, 'most always when I call you, it's fur what you're worth; but this hand hyar's a gent as is wantin' a mite o' business with you. He's huntin' a Jack what looks like it had jumped the pack."

While speaking, the landlord had continued to hold Topeka's hand, signaling him the while with rhythmic squeezes of the same, and looking

hard into his eyes, though not a muscle of his face changed.

Sam turned to the stranger, and nothing in the expression of his face showed that he had been put on his guard.

"Waal, pardner, what kin I do fur you to-day?" he asked, with all seeming frankness.

Nevertheless Jake Fogg made no mistake as to the quarter in which the wind lay.

"I reckon it won't be a bad beginnin' to take somethin' to better acquaintance," he answered, quite as blandly. "An' the landlord'll join us, if he's the good feller he looks to be."

The landlord made a deprecating wave of his hand.

"Waal!" replied Sam, with a short laugh, "I don't often drink without I'm feelin' a mite peaked; but this hyar's my off day, and I don't mind ef I do."

The glasses were filled and emptied, and then Jake brouched his business.

"I'm lookin' fur a pard as I 'lowed to go out to the diggin's along of. He reckoned I'd find him byar unless he got an extra good chance to go before I came. A mite o' business as I've had on hand has hung fire till to-day, an' it looks like he'd seen his way an' gone in. He oughtn't to be more'n a couple o' days ahead o' me, though."

"What-fur lookin' chap might that thar pard be?" asked Sam, in apparent good faith.

Jake described 'Bijah, and to his dismay Lish put in:

"He's my son, an' a likely boy, ef I do say it, as shouldn't."

Jake could have "jumped down his throat," but beyond a slight start he betrayed no concern at this interruption.

"I reckon I hain't seen no sich," said Sam, with the air of trying to recall all the people he had seen within the past few days.

"The landlord 'lowed as he might 'a' seen you with some one o' that description," urged Jake.

"Me?" demanded Sam, turning to the landlord with a blank look of questioning.

"Why, yes, Sam," assented the landlord.

"Day before yistiddy. Who was that thar tenderfoot you was chinnin'?"

"What tenderfoot? I hain't tackled no sich, an' that's a fact."

"Don't you remember?" insisted the landlord.

"Jist after you'd done clawin' Little Phil, you walked out o' hyar, an' run snub up ag'in' a tenderfoot like what this hyar gent has been a-describin' to ye, over thar ag'in' Frenchie's shanty. He had a bay hoss—"

"Mare, ef you please, stranger," interrupted Lish. "He done me out o' that thar fur half what she was worth fur soap-grease an' glue!"

"Hoss, ef you please!" retorted Sam. "I put him down an' set on his neck myself, before any other livin' man ever put a hand on him; an' I orter know."

Then turning to the landlord:

"An' is that what you call a tenderfoot?"

"Waal, I reckon ef he wa'n't that, I'm out," answered the landlord.

"I 'low ye be!"

And Topeka Sam laughed softly, as if it were a huge joke.

"What-fur chap was it then?" asked the landlord.

"You'd orter know."

"Me? I never see him before in all my born days."

"Ye didn't, eh? Waal, then you're a liar, am I? I say ye did."

"Whar? When? What does he hail to?"

"That thar was my ole side-pard, Pete Younger."

"Pete? No! Oh, go sell yerself! I'd know Pete as fur as I could smell him."

"That was him, all the same."

"With all that hair on his mug? Pete's a dandy along o' that snoozer."

"He's jest in, with a stack o' plews, he says, that 'ud make yer mouth water. I 'lowed as I'd gamble him fur the lot, but he says he's Mr. Walker to St. Louis, an' he don't know no Mr. Holdup this side o' that bloomin' burg. He's got somethin' on the string thar, an' don't ye fergit it. I know Pete; an' when he strikes the fuzz off o' that thar jaw o' his'n, his own mother will think he's right out o' Paradise! Shoot me, ef I ain't a mind to trot down to ole St. Lou', jest to see him shine, an' to dance at the weddin'! Tenderfoot be blowed! Haw! haw! haw! I wish't he was by, to byear that!"

Topeka Sam spoke with seeming abandonment to drunken enthusiasm; and Jake Fogg seemed to accept this as final.

"Thar's jest a show as that thar pard o' mine hain't got hvar yet," he said, ignoring the different appearance that Lish's interruptions had given to the matter. "I reckon I'll hang around fur a day or two, an' then, ef I don't hyear nothin' of him, I'll hunt my chance to put fur the other side. I'm obleeged to you, gentlemen."

He turned to leave the place, to be regaled by a last observation from Lish at his back:

"An' ef we don't light onto them ornery critters, I'm a boss out—that's all!"

Jake did not turn round, nor look to see the

grim that he knew must appear on the faces of the landlord and Topeka Sam.

As he passed the open window, however, after leaving the saloon, he grasped Lish by the arm, and with his lips at his ear whispered fiercely:

"Keep on!"

He finished off with a shove that kept the astonished Lish in motion, while he glided back to a position just beside the window.

He did not see the landlord's wink, but he heard his amused laugh, as he remarked to Topeka Sam:

"The ole man give it away, eh?"

"You bet!"

"That there's a sheriff."

"He ain't nothin' else."

"I tried to give you the tip."

"I took, me boy!"

"It was Pete Younger, though!"

And the landlord laughed.

"Pete Tophet! Who's Pete Younger?" asked Sam, complacently disowning the creation of his fancy.

"Do you reckon it was the chap they're after?"

"Of course it was. But I wasn't givin' him away to no sheriff, you bet your sweet life."

"I reckon not. But what's become o' the snoozer? I 'low he wa'n't bankerin' after no pard, nor no dad nuther."

"Not him! I sent him after Cap Collins. He's a clever feller fur all his fool looks, an' Cap'll use him well."

"After Collins? Then he's two days on the road to the diggin's."

"Hoss an' all!" added Sam, with a laugh.

Jake Fogg waited to hear no more. It galled him to hear these fellows chuckling over their success in having played him, and revenge was so sweet, that he did a foolish thing.

Thrusting his head into the window, he drawled:

"By the way, gents, kin you give me any points about Cap Collins, as left hyar t'other day fur the diggin's?"

The landlord and Topeka Sam stared.

"Sold!" cried the former, when he could get breath.

"Bail!" added the latter, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and shrugging his shoulders.

CHAPTER XIII.

A "KNOWIN'" SHERIFF.

JAKE FOGG had no difficulty in finding out all he cared to know about Cap Collins.

Everybody knew Cap, and everybody liked to talk about him.

Within half an hour the sheriff had made all necessary provisions, and was on the trail of the wagon-train.

"Ef you'll find it jest as convenient," he observed to Lish, "I'll git you to button up that lip o' yours when I'm doin' the figgerin'."

"What lip?" asked Lish, who was serenely unaware of anything amiss on his part, so far.

"You come near sp'ilin' our leetle game over thar."

"Thar ain't nothin' sp'ilt, as I knows on. Ain't we after 'em, hot-foot? What more do ye want than that?"

"It 'ud take a long while to straighten it all out, an' we'd better save our breath to cool our porridge, I reckon. All the same, unless you're sp'ilin' fur to say somethin', I'll do most o' the chinnin', ef you please!"

Lish grunted sulkily.

He had never liked Jim Rountree's jackal, and it galled him to "take slack from him" now, but he had the good sense to know that he was no match at wits with the sheriff; so he swallowed his dudgeon, and submitted to this caustic snubbing.

Bareback Buck and his magnificent Pard were too conspicuous to escape the keen eye of the sheriff; and when they had left Atchison, Fogg discovered with no little uneasiness that the dashing plainsman was in advance.

"That's a fellow we want to overtake, if he's intendin' to join the wagon-train, too," observed Jake, giving his horse the spur.

"We hain't no show fur it, whether he is or not," replied Lish. "I know somethin' about hoss-flesh, an' I know we can't tetch one side o' the critter he's on."

"Then we don't want to let him git in much ahead of us."

"Do you 'low as that sneakin' landlord an' t'other one has put him up to cuttin' in ahead of us, an' abettin' them runaways in their defiance o' their guarden?"

"It don't make a dog-goned bit o' difference whether they have or not," said Jake, impatient at Lish's rounded phrase. "If they're with the wagon-train, they'll naturally ask him whether he has seen any signs o' their bein' foiled. Then these cusses, ev'ry mother's son o' 'em, don't want nothin' better'n headin' off a sheriff."

So, urged by the tireless sheriff, who had in mind certain pecuniary arrangements with Jim Rountree in case he was successful, Lish was compelled to do some of the hardest riding of his life, and with scarcely an hour's rest in the next forty-eight.

But their horses were no matches for the

noble beast which Bareback Buck bestrode, and they reached the wagon-train full half a day behind him.

It was almost dark when they drove up, and the sheriff presented his credentials to the wagon-boss.

Cap Collins received the warrant, and examined it with a gathering frown.

"Waal, that looks all straight," he said, rather cavalierly, "but I reckon you won't find what you're after in my train. We hain't got no such folks with us."

"Have you seen anybody answerin' this hyar description?" asked the sheriff, smoothly.

But Cap Collins had had cats purr against his leg before, and was not to be caught by any such tactics.

"Look-a-hyar, my Christian friend," he broke forth, roughly, "ef this hyar was a court, an' I was a witness, an' you was the swapper-o'-lies fur the State, maybe I'd swaller a good deal o' your jaw. But bein's as I'm on my native heath, by Jupiter! an' don't ask no odds o' no man; an' bein's as I'm free to say that I don't like your crowd, nohow ye kin fix it; therefore, as aforesaid, I'm givin' you jest what your papers calls fur; an' the quicker you git out o' my camp, the better I'll like it. Ef you find what you want, you take it; an' ef you don't find it, you clear out!"

Jake Fogg made a systematic search of the wagons, on the chance of finding Rose stowed away in one of them.

Cap Collins stuck close to his heels, so that he had no opportunity to question any one.

Even if he had done so, it is doubtful whether he would have learned anything to his advantage.

Every one had been taken by Rose's beauty; and Cap Collins was already such a favorite that, without understanding the case, all were disposed to accept his adjudication of it, and to reflect his palpable hostility toward the sheriff.

But this was overdoing the matter. Jake Fogg knew enough of human nature to know that the women would not have so generally flouted him, if they had not been prepared for his coming. Therefore Rose and her brother must have been there.

A glance was sufficient to show him that the horseman with the magnificent black steed was also "conspicuous by his absence."

Lish, being on the same track, once more put in his oar.

"Waal, mister, maybe you wouldn't mind tellin' us if a young feller—"

But here Jake cut him off without ceremony.

"Never mind about young fellers," he said. "We don't find what we're after, an' that's enough fur us. Cap, ef you ever come my way, I'll try to treat you better'n you have me. It's only a log house as I've got to offer you, but I'll give you the snuggest berth in it, an' all by yerself. Meanwhile, I reckon we kin camp on the open perrarie, ef we git fur enough off, without givin' you no offense."

"Put as much o' Kansas between us as you comfortably kin," replied Cap, complacently, "an' don't git to windward."

That was their parting, and the disappointed searchers took the back track, followed by a yell of derision from a score of lusty throats, the unmusical baritone of which was veined with a shrill treble from the women and children.

"I'd like to whirl in an' clean out the hull dod-dratted lot!" snarled Lish Losy, peevishly.

"They're cryin' before they're out o' the woods!" muttered the sheriff, his jaws taking a dogged set, and his eyes snapping ominously.

"I'm out a boss, an' that's what's the matter with me!"

"We'll give 'em one round more, anyway."

"Don't you reckon that cussed landlord an' t'other one was jest a-stallin' of us with fool's fodder?"

"Not much they wasn't!"

"Maybe it wa'n't 'Bijah, then, an' we're fooled all round."

"It wa'n't nobody else—you may bet yer life on that!"

"They have been hyere?"

"They have been hyere. I'll gamble on that fur all I'm worth."

"But what's become of 'em? An' now I think of it ag'in, whar's that chap as we've been a-follerin' till every bone in my body is nigh about unfinted?"

"Whar we find one, we'll find the lot of 'em—make no mistake."

"Hain't we orter be goin' t'other way, then? They may have gone on."

"We'll scon find that out. Now I want you to hunt acrost this hyar trail till you find hoof-marks with the toes eastward."

"An' what air you goin' fur to do?"

"You'll mighty soon see, an' that dandy wagon-boss will see too!"

Thereupon, leaving Lish to his task, the sheriff proceeded to make a circuit of the wagon-camp, carefully examining the ground as he rode.

"Waal, now, he ain't no slouch!" ejaculated Cap Collins, as he saw this move.

"Suppose the boys sail in an' ride all over Cain's half-acre?" suggested a plainsman standing near.

"No go," objected Collins. "You can't fool that chap."

"We kin keep him busy till nightfall."

"I don't believe it. He would keep on till he made a surround of us, an' then, if he was in doubt as to any of your trails, he would pick them up afterward. Besides, the ole man'll find sign on the back track. No: I have a better game than that. Let 'em alone. Thar's another trick before we begin to count game."

A yell of triumph from Lish Losy soon proved the soundness of Cap Collins's judgment.

While Lish swung his hat and fairly capered in his delight, the wagon-boss laughed.

"Score one, sheriff," he shouted.

Jake Fogg paid no attention to either him or Losy, but kept doggedly at his task until he had completed the circuit, and satisfied himself that the fugitives had not left the spot by any other than the back trail.

"What did I say?" urged Cap Collins. "That fellow knows what he's about, an' don't you disremember the same!"

The sheriff carefully examined the indications that Losy pointed out, and then, with no trace of excitement or exultation, rode back toward Atchison.

"Now," said Cap Collins, briskly, "I want six men to show that sheriff that he hasn't got a walk-over."

CHAPTER XIV.

BLACK BILL DISAPPEARS.

INSTANTLY every plainsman in the company, and every young man among those who were going to make homes in the far West, sprung to do his bidding, whatever the enterprise.

"Waal, waal, boys!" laughed the wagon-master, "I can't choose you all; more'n that, I can't spare you all."

Among the others was the man who had so startled Rose.

Cap Collins was not indifferent to his offense; but he had been among rough men all his life, and he knew that great allowances were to be made for the influence of Atchison whisky.

Once thoroughly under way, with his men all sobered up and settled down to business, some of the hardest cases might prove to be the best workers.

Moved by Rose Crawford's beauty, he was disposed to discipline Black Bill severely; but as he cooled off, he was not sorry for a good excuse to overlook the matter; the more so since Bill behaved well after the knock-down, showing a disposition to make amends for his fault; and often a little indulgence shown to one who is conscious of meriting the reverse will bring out his best qualities.

Cap therefore had gone to Black Bill, and told him of Rose's intercession in his behalf.

"Make no mistake," he had said in conclusion. "Thar ain't nothin' weak-kneed about me when I get after a man, an' I don't furgit easy. I 'low to have things go on about so, or throw up my job. But the leetle lady wouldn't let me off till I promised to bring in the Dutch verdict—not guilty, but you mustn't do it ag'in! So now you know what you've got to depend on."

Black Bill had shuffled uneasily, with his eyes on the ground, mumbling out an indistinct acknowledgment of his sense of the favor shown him.

This might be the natural embarrassment of a man who had never learned to eat humble-pie with an appearance of relish.

If the American idea is to make a thoroughly independent people, we must not be surprised if one now and then takes reproof with ill grace, while learning that a frank acknowledgment of error is a part of true independence.

Like the sturdy freeman he was, Cap Collins wanted no servility in the men he commanded; and he was satisfied with Bill's submission.

So now the offender urged his claim in the words:

"You'd orter give me a show to make up to the leetle lady. I owe her one fur givin' her sich a skeer."

"All right, Bill," replied Cap. "You carry yourself straight hereafter, an' we won't say any more about it."

"You tie to me, Cap. From this out, I am as straight as a string."

And he was permitted to be one of the party.

Cap waited till after nightfall, and then sent out his decoys—for this was the part they were to play.

"You go due north," was his direction, "till you're beyond the spyin' o' that keen sheriff. Then you turn east, till you strike seven-mile Creek a mile or so above the ford. You foller the bed o' the stream down to the ford. Then you go out on the other side, jest as if Buck an' his crowd had kept straight across. A mile or so on the other side, you leave the trail, and stand in a chaparral, jest like as if Buck an' them had gone in thar to hide an' let the sheriff an' Old Hayseed pass. Then you go on, an' keep the back track till you strike the old rout. Thar you turn west ag'in, an' keep along till you kin drop down on to our trail somewhar west o' hyar. Don't let nary livin' mortal see ye ef ye kin help it."

"Make it as soon as you kin, boys. Don't let

no grass grow under your feet. An' remember, you've got to git into an' out o' Seven-mile Creek before the sheriff strikes the ford. I reckon the ole chap with him is so nigh played out, that they won't do no great sight o' ridin' to-night; but don't you take no chances on that!"

Then away they rode into the darkness.

They were successful in carrying out this programme, so that at the ford it appeared as if the five riders had kept on directly across the stream.

With tireless energy, they made scarcely a moment's pause till they reached the old route, about noon the following day.

So far there had been no danger of their being seen by any one of whom Sheriff Fogg could make inquiry, but now they were in the direct line of travel.

So, after losing their trail in the confused medley of hoof-prints, they went into hiding, and slept soundly, man and beast, till night-fall.

Once more they set out. The sky was lowering, and the night dark. The wind buffeted them in a way calculated to make each think more of himself than of his comrades.

They rode in no particular order, now one forging ahead, and now another.

It was the business of the man who happened to be in advance to keep the track, and it was taken for granted that those in the rear would have no difficulty in keeping track of him.

That one of their number should desire to "lose" the rest of them, did not enter into the calculations of the other five.

They were thinking of executing their mission, in spite of difficulties and discomforts, in a way that would win a grip of the hand all round, and a hearty word of approval, from Cap Collins.

So it was well toward morning when a temporary halt to rest their weary horses revealed the fact that they were only five who had been six.

"Why, who's missin'?" asked Ans' Matchin, who made the discovery. "Thar'd orter be another one of us."

"It don't take a very careful count o' noses to see that," answered Rufe Haggerman.

"It's Bill Dorn," said Mississip'. "Ding my ole moccasins ef I see how we managed to git lost, even ef he laid hisself out fur to lose us!"

"He has lost us, an' lost us bad."

"You bet!"

"Cap made him weary to-day."

"But they called that off."

"I reckon it was that thar walkin' arsenal as sickened him o' Western travel."

"Say! What's the reason he wouldn't want to git squar' fur that same tap on the knowledge-box?"

"That 'ud be nateral. Nobody don't go weepin' fur them things."

"He could sell out to the sheriff!"

Nobody made any immediate reply to this proposition. It was so serious that they stood staring at one another through the darkness.

But for the darkness, they could have seen cheeks pale through the bronze of years of exposure, night and day, to an open sky, and lips take a hard set, and eyes burn with a resentment that sought action more readily than words.

If this was the true explanation of Black Bill's absence, they had failed—miserably failed in the trust that Cap had reposed in them.

"What's to do?" asked one, in a low, unmoved voice, after a long pause.

"Ef we could git him before he got word with the sheriff—"

The sentence was left incomplete. There was a world of unexpressed meaning in it.

"Which we never could," answered a voice.

"It wouldn't do no good to git him after he got word to the sheriff, I reckon?"

"It would be satisfaction!"

"You bet, by Joe!"

If any one, used only to the peaceful ways of an orderly community, could have stood and listened to those quiet voices coming out of the darkness, the quality of the last two ejaculations would have made his flesh creep.

The lower they became, the more portentous. Another reflective pause followed, and then one of the men said:

"I 'low as Cap would druther know this as soon as possible, an' have the show to play his own hand."

"It won't be an easy thing to tell him."

"It's got to be did."

"The sooner, the better, boys. Hoss-flesh ain't nowhar."

No one thought of his own endurance. The only question was, would the lithe legs and stout hearts of their faithful servants hold out?

"We'd orter be able to overtake Cap by night," observed one.

"One of us will!" declared another, positively.

"Boyees," drawled old Mississip', "don't be too brash. A hoss kin do jest so much, an' then he's done—all the sooner ef you break his wind."

"We'll gauge the thing a mite above the

average," replied Ans' Matchin: "an' thar orter be one in the four as kin stand it."

"Stiddy an' sure! Stiddy an' sure!" insisted the old plainsman, sagely. "That's saved many a scalp, an' won many a one too, boyees! The p'izon Injuns all knows that, by natur'."

Then into the saddle, and away!

Would they win? And if not, what then?

CHAPTER XV.

WHO WINS?

"STIDDY, boyees! Stiddy an' sure! That's my motto," called old Mississip' after the young hot-heads who were pressing on before him.

"Come on, pap!" responded Ans' Matchin, over his shoulder.

"You're makin' too fast time fur my leetle nag, jest at the settin' out."

"You'd other be better mounted. A batch o' p'izon Sioux wouldn't wait on your motions."

"I reckon they'd hev to, or scoop the ole man in."

"I'm afraid they'd scoop!"

"Like as not. But don't stop fur me, ef you're in a bigger hurry'n I be."

"If I'm alive," returned Matchin, his voice ringing hard with determination, "Cap Collins won't have to wait on me five minutes longer'n has to be, with the best me an' Leetle Antelope has got in us!"

Little Antelope was the horse he rode, and though he had been beaten more than once because of his master's persistence in matching him against all comers, Ans' could never be persuaded that it was due to superior powers in his competitor.

"Why, it don't stan' to natur'!" he was wont to declare, when explaining away a defeat. "Jest look at them legs! Run yer eye along that bar'll! I'll leave that head an' them years, by gee, to ary man what knows a hoss from a side o' bacon! Action? Waal, when you kin fetch me five-foot-two o' female human-natur' what kin waltz to Leetle Antelope's step, we'll talk about action! I tell ye what's what, gentlemen!—wind an' limb was never put together in jest that thar shape before."

"Beat? Who in Cain says he wa'n't beat—this time? But I tell ye he has contrary spells. That's whar he gits me! I can't coax him out of 'em. But he scoops the deck when he's a mind to. Can't I give you a string o' names as long as my arm, whar he's kep' jest fur enough ahead fur to tease 'em! An' when it comes to business—ye hyear me?—he's thar!"

Such was the man, and such the horse, whose best was pledged to Cap Collins.

"I'm 'lowin' to make it up to Cap, as fur as I kin," said the man, "fur lettin' that thar scal-awag shake the socks off o' me! Ef Cap'll put on a pair o' bran'-new stogie boots, an' kick me three times around the hui dinged kerrell, an' finish off by wipin' up the ground with me till it looks like a buffaler-waller, he'll do me a distinguished favor, an' that's a fact!"

"I 'low I could ease my conscience with half o' that," observed Deadwood Dug, dryly.

He thought that Ans' was rather "piling on the agony."

But Ans' meant it, in spirit, if not to the letter. And he determined to redeem himself in some measure, by being the first to tell Cap of the misfortune.

"Waal," said old Mississip', resignedly, "I reckon you carry too long laigs fur Short-an'-dirty. He means well, but the Lord hain't favored him wi' some."

Short-an'-dirty was a forlorn little beast. He looked as if he had never been groomed by any other than the hand of Nature—and this was probably true. He seemed to be always shedding his coat, and shedding it in spots. Maybe he was so devoted as not to wish to appear less shabby than his master. Certainly, no tramp was ever followed by a dog more faithful, more fond, more content, on a footing of more easy comradeship, than was Short-an'-dirty with old Mississip'.

Whether true or not that his pace was over-matched, he would pluckily have stuck to the others, but the hand of his master on the bridle-rein said no; and he yielded, who can tell with what sacrifice of horsely ambition?—since little horses may be as vain as little men!

"What's the word, Cockeye?" Ans' Matchin' called back over his shoulder to one who lingered at old Mississip's side.

"I reckon I'll copper with the ole man," answered Cockeye. "I've al'ays found him a good 'un to tie to."

"All right, ef you'd druther ride in a hearse!"

"I reckon I'll git thar, all the same."

So the distance between the laggards and those in advance increased, till when the day broke old Mississip' and Short-an'-dirty, and he who had decided to "tie to them," were out of sight.

"I say, boys," suggested Rufe Haggerman, "it orter be about time fur us to strike acrost the perrairie, ef we're 'lowin' to make a short cut-off to the train."

"Not hyar," objected Deadwood Dug. "We have got a clean road before us, an' we kin make better time by hangin' to it till noon, an' then strikin' off about southwest. That'll be cut-off enough fur us."

"But Cap ain't as fur ahead as that."

"I'd like to know ef he won't be—by night. That's what we've got to calculate on."

"Oh, no! What do you 'low, Ans'?"

"I don't know about hangin' on till noon; but I reckon we don't want to be too previous. I don't know the country between hyar an' Cap's trail."

"Oh, the country's good enough."

"I reckon I'll stand by Dug's idee a while yet."

They rode on for an hour, and then Rufe said, abruptly:

"Waal, what say? I'm off!"

"Good luck to ye!" replied Ans', to whom the appeal was made.

"When I git to the train, I'll send scouts out ahead to hunt you fellers."

"You'll find me in bed in the forrard wagon."

"But ye won't find nothin' to eat!" was Dug's threat, slapping his stomach.

"I'll bet you I'll be the only one that don't miss the trail—not countin' ole Mississip'. I reckon he's turned off this hyar rout' long ago."

"Oh, you'll have a dead-sure thing on the trail. Take it up an' carry it along with you, fur what it'll fetch second-hand."

"No go."

"Nary!"

"Waal, so-long!"

And Rufe reined to the left, and struck off across the open prairie.

"Don't you go to roost in that thar belt o' timber!" Ans' called after him, looking away to a dark streak that skirted the southern horizon.

"I'll be to roost before you be, an' don't you furgit it!" was Rufe's retort. "An' when Deadwood Dug calls fur rations, they'll tell him they've been struck by an Asiatic famine, an' cleaned out!"

With this good-humored banter they parted company, and Rufe dwindled into a speck, and finally vanished in the dark line of timber.

He had reason to regret the course he had taken.

Instead of being merely the green border of a ribbon of silver, the timber proved to be a continuous growth, the extent of which the eye could not range.

Moreover, the land was different. The roll of the prairie was broken into low, irregular mounds, scarcely large enough to be dignified by the name of hills. Under foot, the prairie-grass was replaced by a scattered growth of bushes. Last, and worst of all, there were thicket-clogged swamps, and stretches of bog-land, like green lakes.

Rufe did not discover this all at once, but as he sought to keep his course due southwest through the tract he found his way more and more obstructed.

"Jest my blasted luck!" he ejaculated, as his horse toiled at a snail's pace through the heavy soil, or tossed his head in protest against being forced to penetrate a thicket of bushes. "Out thar in the open them fellers is scootin' along like slidin' down a greased pole, with nothin' in God's world to hinder; an' hyar I be, slattin' through the bresh, an' wallerin' in the bog! An' thar's Cap a-waitin', an' grub an' bunk a-waitin' with him! Ah, waal, I reckon Ans' an' Deadwood'll breed a famine thar, as they said, before I show up."

Not that Rufe was actually suffering for food, or was likely to. But what they had taken with them was dried meat, because in the hard riding before them it was best to travel light. And now Rufe's mouth watered, as he thought of the steaming coffee and savory steak that made the wagon-train rise in his imagination a bourne of toothsome delights.

He could see it—the parked wagons, the twinkling fires, the figures moving about. Here one was dancing; from yonder came a voice in song, presently drowned by a burst of laughter from another quarter, over a humorous story or the perpetration of a practical joke. In one of the wagons a mother was lulling her child to sleep on her breast, crooning softly one of those old hymns that haunt the childhood's memory of all of us; in the shadow of another, a young girl listened to the tender flattery of her lover.

But look! A sudden excitement. Everybody runs to look out over the darkened prairie, with their backs to the blinding firelight. Word has been passed that the decoys are returning, after having shown the sheriff the way back home.

Almost the first thing thought of is that they will be hungry; some body shouts out that they ought to have the top-notch of everything in camp, and the best cook in the train shakes her fat sides with gratified laughter at finding herself in especial demand, and ordering those who are chaffing her to "clar de kitchen," begins to fetch out the tidbits she had laid aside for "her boys."

So vividly did this start up in Rufe's imagination that it almost seemed a real event which he was witnessing, and with a shake of the head he sighed:

"But they'll be disappointed, though, when it's only Ans' an' Dug, an' them clean beat, with nothin' to say but sold!"

At the thought of being denied even the poor

satisfaction of being among those who pressed through to tell Cap the bad news, and give him the earliest opportunity to take steps to retrieve the situation if possible, Rufe warmed with renewed impatience.

"It must be that dog-goned Seven-mile Creek that's a-doin' all this," he reflected. "But ain't thar no end to the 'tarnal thing? Once I cross it, I'd orter strike the perrairie on the t'other side. An' it oughtn't to be fur across sich a beggarly branch. I reckon I'm a-takin' of it end-ways."

So unreasonable did any other supposition seem when once this thought had occurred to him, that he blamed himself for so stupidly persisting in floundering in this quagmire, when by turning a little to the west he could regain the firm prairie and speed on his way.

He turned, but before long found that he had run out on a tongue of comparatively stable ground into an impassible morass.

Retracing his steps for some distance, he resumed his course southward, only to find himself stopped in this direction.

Then began a hunt out of the maze into which he had fallen, in which no particular direction was followed.

When at last he came to the banks of a clearly-defined stream, he could not have given the faintest idea of the course by which he had reached it.

He crossed it, and after more tedious wading of marshes and threading the mazes of brush, he came out, at last, upon the unobstructed prairie.

But he looked ruefully at the place of the sun in the sky, and then at his jaded and bedraggled horse.

"Waal," he muttered, dejectedly, "I reckon one of us won't see no camp to-night, but right out hyar in the open. Ef I kin pick up that trail even, before I sleep, it'll be a god-send."

He was forced to let his horse rest, and, weary as he was himself, humane enough to rub the beast down with prairie-grass, before stretching himself on his back and closing his eyes with a sigh.

Too much exhausted to eat, the horse, after a feeble attempt at nibbling the grass, lay down and stretched himself at full length on his side, with a sigh of relief like that of his master.

With a feeling that all further effort to communicate with Cap, before his comrades reached the train, would be so much strength thrown away, Rufe only walked his horse at intervals until he got so that he grazed, and then camped for the night, without having even reached the trail of the wagon-train.

"Ef the rest hain't done better'n me," he said to himself, just before dropping off to sleep, "that sheriff will count game on Cap, what with that thief, Black Bill, slyin' his best to him under the board."

CHAPTER XVI.

"STIDDY AN' SURE!"

AND what of the rest, to whose better luck Rufe was forced to trust?

Ans' and Deadwood Dug rode on in silence till their comrade had disappeared in the timber.

Ans' had glanced repeatedly after him, as if to note the time he was making. Each look seemed to add a line of anxiety to his brow.

When Rufe was quite out of sight, Ans' said nothing, but he insensibly quickened the pace of his horse.

He rode with his eyes straight before him and his lips close-locked.

Finally he broke silence.

"If Rufe should cut in ahead of us, along o' takin' the thing on the slantendickaler, while we was trompin' all round Robin Hood's barn, I reckon I'd sell out cheap, an' on long time—ef he should cut in ahead of us!"

"He won't!" declared Dug, confidently.

"But ef he should?" insisted Ans'.

"Waal, I reckon he'd be thar!" laughed Dug. "I don't see as you kin make that any longer or shorter."

"Oh, yes!" assented Matchin. "But whar'd we be?"

"It 'ud be safer to gamble on whar we wouldn't be—in camp!"

Ans' relapsed into gloomy silence, evidently to ponder the situation with no satisfactory outcome; for after a long time he abruptly broke out, as if there had been no break in the conversation:

"An' thar's ole Mississip'!"

"Ho's safe," returned Deadwood Dug, unconcernedly—"safe as if he was four foot under ground."

"Fore-foot be blowed! When we crawl into camp, he'll be safe with his hind feet to the fire, snorin' to make the dead turn over in their graves, an' ask ef it's Resurrection Morn—an' that's what's the matter with him!"

"You turned out o' the wrong side o' the bed this mornin', Ans'!" laughed his comrade. "Take it stiddy an' sure—as Mississip' says."

Ans' only dug his spurs into the heaving flanks of his horse.

"Hold on! hold on!" cried Dug. "Stick a

pin thar, an' call it a walkin' match! I 'lowed to have a purty toler'ble bunch o' legs under me, pardner; but, sufferin' sinners! your two pair takes my two pair. You'll wind that critter, an' he'll put you afoot, sure as you live."

"I'd kill him, an' two more like him, if I had 'em, before I'd let ole Mississip' beat me into camp, after our leavin' him so crank! You lay yer pile of that wagon-train stays on top o' this hyar airth, he'll loom up over the perrairie by nightfall, if not before. You can't lose him, an' you can't tucker 'im out. He keeps a-comin'!"

"An' the Kingdom's a-comin'—only it's a-comin' so deuced slow!"

"He'll git thar all the same!"

And this fear haunted Ans' so, that by ten o'clock he announced his determination to leave the route they were following, and strike across the open prairie on such a diagonal as he believed would intercept the trail not far behind the train.

Deadwood Dug protested, but Ans' stood firm.

"We're chancin' too much," he argued. "I reckon Rufe was right about ole Mississip' leavin' this hyar rout' a long time ago. He ain't chancin', the ole man ain't. An' what do we want, scootin' along hyar half-way to Californy? Stick 'er out, ef you like; but I'm callin' fur a new deal."

"I won't go alone," said Dug, yielding against his better judgment. "But I reckon we're throwin' away jest so much o' Cap's time."

Now Ans' was possessed by a fever of anxiety. Having gone so far as to begin to suspect his own judgment, the conviction grew upon him that Rufe Haggerman had been right; and though he said nothing, he began to accuse Deadwood Dug in his mind of having led him to overshoot the mark.

In spite of Dug's earnest arguments, instead of shaping his course toward the southwest, he went due south.

"We're losin' all we'd gain by a cut-off," urged Dug.

"I reckon we've lost it already," answered Ans', shortly.

Now he would not spare the time to rest, though his horse needed it sadly. Instead, he relieved the animal of his weight by dismounting, but kept him moving at a fair walk toward the longed-for goal.

At two o'clock they reached a point where he thought he recognized a landmark.

Standing in the saddle, he could see, dim in the distance, just looming up over the rim of the horizon toward the southeast, a blue knoll.

"Thar! thar!" he cried, excitedly. "What's that, I want to know?"

"You git me," answered Dug, following the direction of his eagerly-pointed finger.

"That's Dead Man's Butte! That's what it is."

"Maybe it is; maybe not."

"It ain't nothin' else. A purty mess we've made o' this hyer! We've outmarched Cap by a good ten mile—yes, twenty. You figger on that, an' see whar we'd orter took that cut-off. Rufe Haggerman is half-way to camp by this time; an' we—ef we git thar by seven o'clock, or eight, it'll be more by luck than calculation. Have you any idee how fur the trail that Cap's a-breakin' is from the rout' we've been pasierin' on?"

A "pasier," on the Pacific Slope, is a pleasure jaunt. Hence Ans' Matchin's sarcasm.

"No, I hain't," answered Dug.

"Then you'll find out before you smell coffee ag'in!"

"You've made up yer mind that that thar's Dead Man's Butte?"

"You bet! An' I'm off fur it hot-foot. I want to be in sight, at any rate, o' ole Mississip' an' Rufe, when they go in."

"Waal, good luck to ye! I'll tell the boys you've gone back fur somethin' you thought you'd lost."

"Ef! You ain't a-goin'—"

"To make twenty miles further to the west before I look fur Cap's trail? You bet I be!"

"Waal, the more fool you!"

"Time'll tell."

Ordinarily Ans' would have protested further, but just now he was provoked at Deadwood Dug for having led him into what he believed to be a folly, and was willing that he should receive some punishment for it.

So these last parted company, Ans' scouring away toward the southeast at the best pace he could spur his jaded horse to.

"Thar goes a blasted fool!" laughed Deadwood Dug to himself. "He's lost his head; an' when a man loses his head, he's done fur. Now, bein' as the ole man pulled him up, an' Rufe he's gone off half-cocked, you couldn't beat it into Ans' Matchin that Cap was anywhar but away back on the back-track; an' the further he goes, the further back he'll allow Cap is."

The trouble with him is, he ain't so anxious to git to Cap as soon as possible, as he is not to be beat by ole Mississip' or Rufe. He 'lows to take the same chances as they do, an' leave it, t'other or which, to the legs o' their horses.

"Now, I believe in headpiece—I do!"

So, taking the direction of his "headpiece,"

Deadwood Dug turned due southwest, going off fairly at right angles with the line Ans' Matchin had chosen.

He rode two, three, four hours, seeing nothing of the wagon-train or of its trail.

The rapidly westering sun told him that it was now six o'clock.

Another weary hour as fruitless as the last, and he came to a halt with indecision.

Standing in the saddle, he swept the horizon with his eye, from the west, clear round the south and east, to the northeast.

There was no use in scanning the rest of the circle, for he was sure that he had not crossed the trail of the wagon-train. Yet, his faith in his own judgment once admittedly shaken, he did even this.

Nothing met his eyes but the rolling prairie, dotted here and there with a little motte of timber.

But now a trait of Deadwood Dug's character came out. He really feared that he had miscalculated Cap's probable position, and crossed the line of its course in advance of the train itself. But, instead of freely admitting his error, and going eastward, on the lookout for the train, or, in the event of failure in this, with a view to reaching a point where he would be sure to strike its trail either north or south of him; instead of adopting this reasonable course, when it occurred to him he set his teeth and muttered:

"No, I'm dogged ef I do—fur ole Mississip', or Ans' Matchin, or any o' 'em!"

Thereupon, with mulish obstinacy he resumed his course, making only the concession of turning due south.

At nightfall he stood on the open prairie, gazing with a vexed frown at his sole companion.

The horse, his head drooping nearly to the ground, his eyes closing and opening slowly, and with now and then a feeble, shuddering sneeze of exhaustion, waited uncomplainingly his master's further will.

"Waal, ole man," said Dug to the animal, "ef you'd come hyar o' yer own notion, I'd say we was a pair o' fools! As it is, I b'lieve you've got more sense than your driver."

It was now time to pull up and own beat, since even Deadwood Dug's obstinacy admitted that there was nothing further for him in that direction but Mexico and the Pacific Coast.

He, like Rufe Haggerman, went into solitary camp, wishing the others better luck.

"Better sense they've got already!" was an admission, the bitterness of which showed the depth of his chagrin.

But Deadwood Dug had been right in one thing. He had said that Ans' Matchin would wind his horse, and he did.

Growing more and more anxious at every step to make up the distance he supposed he had lost, and cursing his folly in what he now called his yielding to the judgment of Deadwood Dug against that of Rufe Haggerman, though indeed at the time it had been his own as well, he urged his horse with more and more persistency, till the panting beast staggered as he ran.

Then came a stumble, and a sudden collapse.

Ans' saved himself from an ugly fall by his agility, but the horse lay as he had dropped, and refused to attempt to rise.

The piteous appeal in his eyes, as he opened them only when Ans' tugged at the bridle, bidding him to get up in far from compassionate tones, showed that, if he had had the power of speech, he would have asked only to be let to die.

Ans' was enraged at this mishap. It was not more than mid-afternoon, and in the hours before sunset he might yet win.

But he saw that the animal could carry him no further, and nothing would come of useless cruelty.

Was all lost, then? Must he stop here and wait till his horse recuperated his wasted energies? What could he report to Cap on the morrow? That he had proved so poor an economist as to squander all of his resources at the outset, and be left afoot.

For a moment Ans' thought of deserting the train, rather than "face the music to such a tune."

Then came a different resolve. It made his eyes flash fire, and drew his muscles tense.

Picketing his horse, so that he could rise and graze when he felt inclined, he attached a bit torn from the corner of his blanket to the end of his gun-wiper, and stuck this signal in the ground, at such a distance that the horse could not reach it and knock it down.

His rifle he laid across his saddle, near this diminutive flag.

Then, drawing in his belt another hole, he set out across the prairie with the long lope which Indian runners have taught to the white men.

Profiting by his bitter experience with his horse, he kept himself well within his powers, making calculations, however, only for the balance of the time to nightfall.

If he had not come within sight of the wagon-train by that time, it would make little difference what further power of endurance he might or might not possess.

"While thar's life in me, I'll make the most of it!" he muttered to himself.

From time to time he slowed down to a walk, with a long, gliding step, to regain his breath, and to relieve the fierce thumping of his heart against his ribs.

But from the point where he was "put afoot" to the trail of the wagon-train, he never ceased to advance.

He had warning of the trail before he actually saw it. About an hour before sunset he espied a horseman skimming the prairie at a steady gallop.

"Mississipp! Oh, yes, it's bound to be Mississipp!" he muttered, with a bitterness that choked him into silence.

And this surmise proved to be correct, as the horseman became more clearly distinguishable with decreasing distance.

Ans' knew that the old hunter was following the trail of the wagon-train, on his principle of taking no chances; and this was evidence that, whatever the result with Deadwood Dug, Ans' had retraced his steps further than there was need of.

With a boiling up of savage desperation, and a dogged resolve to do or die, he turned westward on a line almost parallel to that which old Mississipp' was following.

He did not intend to intercept the old hunter. On the contrary, he wished him to pass at a distance too great for the interchange of speech.

He wanted neither commiseration nor sarcasms.

The old fellow's warning was ringing in his ears.

"Stiddy an' sure! stiddy an' sure! That's a motter as saves scalps, an' wins hot grub at sundown."

So determined was he to hold no communication with old Mississipp', that he would not look at him, even when he heard the old fellow's halloo coming faint with distance; and he did not turn his head till the sound of footfalls warned him that Mississipp' had left the wagon trail, and was close upon him.

As he rode up, exhaustion and discouragement got the better of Ans' Matchin's obstinacy, and he involuntarily dropped into a painful, reeling walk.

"Waal, pardner, what's gone wi' you, anyhow?" asked Mississipp'.

"I should think you could see for yourself," answered Ans', ungraciously.

"You do look clean beat, an' that's a fact. Put ye afoot, did he? I 'lowed he would. But I didn't 'low to see ye hoofin' it along like this hyar. Cap wouldn't ask so much, an' you knowed yer uncle was comin' along som'rs. But, whar's the rest o' the boys?"

Mississipp' swung from the saddle as he spoke; and though he had not expected it in so tough an old knot, Ans' supposed that it was to spell himself from the fatigue of riding. In no other way, however, did he give evidence of having been under an unusual strain. He was serenely cheerful, as was his wont.

But Short-an'-dirty had not come off scathless. He looked as if his master's policy of "stiddy an' sure" worked very well with him, but it was possible to have too much of even a good thing.

"I'm sure I don't know," was the rather ungracious answer Mississipp' got to his inquiry after the boys.

"Waal, I reckon it won't pay to lose no flesh worretin' about them. Every dog guards his own bone, on the perrairies. Leastways, we ain't got no time to palaver jest now. The thing is, to git that bit o' news to Cap, like a hot cake—right out o' the spider. Ef you've got it in you to fotch Short-an'-dirty along slow an' easy, I reckon I kin cover more groun' afoot."

"No! no! Keep your own hoss! Mine has put me afoot an' I reckon I kin stand it."

And Ans' shrunk from the proffer of the old hunter with all the vim left in him by his long run.

"But that ain't nuther hyar nor thar—what you kin stand, or what you can't stand. It's the gittin' o' the news to Cap, I tell yer."

"Go on, then. Don't stop fur me."

"Stop fur you? Who in thunder's proposin' to stop fur you? I ain't stoppin' fur nuthin' on top o' this hyar airth! But you kin git along better with the critter, an' I kin git along better wi'out her. What do you want better'n that? Nonsense, man!"

"I ain't ridin' no man's hoss," persisted Ans', doggedly.

"Lead 'er by the halter-strap, then!"

And throwing the rein over Matchin's shoulder, Mississipp' set out at a brisk run.

Firmness and independence are all very well, but a thoroughly played out man's legs give him away.

With this kindness forced upon him as if it were a service asked of him, Ans' Matchin's obstinacy oozed out of him, leaving him weak and miserable, and almost grateful.

"Leave yer rifle," he called after Mississipp', as some sort of return. "I kin carry it as well as not."

"What? leave ole Betty behind? No! no! The ole girl an' me has laid side an' side in the same blanket fur too many a year for that! When I git so I can't carry her, I reckon I won't be no good fur nobody."

And on he went with unslackened pace.

It was evident that he could make as good if not better time afoot, as he had said; for when Ans' had climbed into the saddle not without difficulty, the old man gained steadily upon the best speed he had the energy to get out of the horse, though he was selfish enough to seek to gratify, at the animal's expense, his desire not to be entirely out of sight when old Mississipp' entered the camp.

He had to swallow this bitter pill, nevertheless.

If old Mississipp' had been a self-regulating machine, instead of automaton of bone and muscle, he could not have held his pace more steadily than he did, mile in and mile out.

When the sun went down, he was out of sight, Ans' Matchin having long since abandoned a losing race.

Making it his sole business to keep in the saddle, he left the jaded beast to "gang his ain gait. Of that gait, the best that can be said is, that it was "stiddy," and "sure" to make the desired goal if he kept up long enough.

Night settled down upon him, but trusting all to the animal's instincts, he thanked God for the rest of the saddle.

On ahead, old Mississipp' followed the general direction of the trail, guiding himself by the stars, till at last he espied the twinkling of camp-fires.

The picture in Rufe Haggerman's imagination was quite faithfully realized.

Though Cap did not expect to see his decoys till the next day at the nearest, yet all day, and especially after the train had halted for the night, there had been eyes—some of them very bright ones!—looking back over the trail for a first glimpse of the returning emissaries.

With the settling down of darkness, the expectation was given up for the night, and the life of the camp proceeded as usual.

Many were tired enough with their day's journey to hail with satisfaction the opportunity to seek "nature's sweet restorer, balmy sleep." But there are always those whose animal spirits seem inexhaustible, and they made the camp a scene of merriment.

It was not kept up long, for they must be astir again by four in the morning; but it was jolly fun while it lasted.

So it happened that old Mississipp' ran almost into the camp before he was discovered, and that by a picket.

Then all was the wildest excitement.

What had happened? Had there been a fight with the sheriff? How was it that only one returned, and he afoot?

It could not be said that old Mississipp' was exhausted with running, but even his iron frame now gave unmistakable signs of the protracted strain to which it had been subjected.

In his quest of Cap Collins, he only stopped to assure everybody that the boys were all right, "as fur as he knew," but that qualification was enough to give rise to the wildest surmises.

Cap's face was watched as he received Mississipp's communication, and a discouraging augury was drawn from his angry frown, followed by an immediate call for more volunteers to do him a personal service.

By the eagerness with which this was responded to, it was evident that he could command the whole camp to carry out his wishes, whatever they might be; and as for that Puke sheriff, all were ready to "snatch him bald-headed!" "Salt wouldn't save him," if he fell into their hands.

Cap selected six, but when they learned the service required of them, the three first in his choice declared that they would have no addition to their numbers.

"What!" cried the leading spirit among them, "do you 'low as we can't take them fellers even-handed? A Puke sheriff! To the deuce with him! An' that slab-sided representative from the aguer deestrick—what's he good fur? As fur Bill Dorn, I've been achin' fur to take his measure ever sence he jined the train. No! no! Cap!—make us man fur man at the outside."

In the general interest, not to rob the train of its best working hands, this was acceded to, and the men set out in the darkness toward the southeast.

They were just going as Ans' Matchin came jogging up.

He was sulky, and disposed to avoid everybody. He would not be consoled by praises of the pluck with which he had made his way to camp, though "put afoot," where the other two had failed. He listened to Cap's thanks with his eyes on the ground, and his face clouded.

Through the talk of all about him, he heard only the long drawn snores of old Mississipp', who, with his feet to the fire, was digesting a dinner that would have stalled an ostrich, a camel, a grizzly bear—anything but just old Mississipp' himself!

He had left a short and seemingly unfeeling direction for the comfort of Short-an'-dirty.

"When he comes in, turn him loose."

When Cockeye made his appearance some time later, he explained his tardiness in a very remarkable way.

"The ole man outrode me—that's all!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A COSTLY DIALOGUE.

BLACK BILL deserted his companions at the very outset of their second night's ride.

It was an easy thing to do, since all through the previous night he had kept in the rear, so that, when he had carried out his purpose, he would be less likely to be missed.

The buffeting wind, as we have said, made the interest of each center chiefly in his own comfort, and Bill had only to pull up his horse, and let the others go on without him.

Once clear of them, he rode directly back along the trail which Cap Collins had taken, toward the ford across Seven-mile Creek.

He had traversed perhaps half the distance, when, without warning of sight or sound, he was abruptly called to a halt by a voice out of the darkness.

So unexpected was this, that his heart gave a single leap into his throat, as he thought that his treachery had been detected, and the men he had deserted had cut in ahead of him, and were about to make him a prisoner.

His hand was on its way to his revolver, when a second thought told him the absurdity of his fear, he having come by the nearest route to the spot.

If not they, who could it be but the sheriff who had shown that he knew a thing or two about scouting, and who was quite equal to utilizing everybody to the accomplishment of his purpose?

"All right, boss!" therefore responded Black Bill, pulling up his horse.

"Who air you, out on the tramp at this hour o' night?"

"Jest the man you want to see, cap'n, an' I kin prove it, ef you'll give me a show."

"Stay whar you air, then, an' let's hyear what you've got to say."

"I'm after the Puke sheriff what dropped in on Cap Collins yistiddy. I think I drap to you, pardner; but ef you'll let me sample the yawp o' that lantern-jawed specimen what you was totin' along with you, I'll be dead sart'in."

"What is thar in my yawp," began Lish, only to be interrupted by Black Bill.

"That's the music! I smell yer breath, pardner, the minute you open yer mouth!" was Bill's laughing explanation.

"Waal, now that you know who we air, what have you got to say?" demanded the sheriff, suspiciously.

"Jest this. You're huntin' a gal what appropriates the bakery, fur good looks; a couple o' boys as is well enough as boys go; an' a sample copy of Ole Slab-sides, hyar—the same bein' mounted on hossflesh as it 'ud be worth any man's while to steal, ef he got the chance"—at which Lish Losy heaved a dismal sigh over the loss of Lightning Bug—"an' Slab-sides junior havin' a small arsenal o' bowie-knives strapped to him, to make him look more like a jackass an' less like a calf."

"Waal, what ef we air huntin' 'em?"

"What would it be worth to you, stranger, to be put on the track o' them same?"

"We're on their track already."

"You be, eh?"

"Of course we air."

"Sure about that?"

There was that in Black Bill's manner which, coupled with another thing over which he had been puzzling, made Jake Fogg hesitate.

"We're on thair trail fast enough," he said, presently, with dogged insistence.

"Oh, yes?" assented Black Bill, sarcastically. "Nothin' quare about that thar trail—oh, no!"

"What should be quare about it?"

"Wonder ef the Puke sheriff don't wear leather goggles, after all. Reckon, now, I'd better do my business with Ole Slab-sides."

"Look a' hyar, stranger—come down to biz. What air you up to, anyway?"

"Biz, is it? Waal, hyar's biz! Let me tell you a thing or two about yourself."

"You knowed as the quarry you was after had been in Cap Collins's camp, you did; and maybe you missed a gay an' festive galoot as come out of Atchison ahead o' you. So when you hunted over that thar back trail, you got 'em down fine—five shod hosses, an' one bar'foot, all straight as a string."

"How's that, now, pardner?"

"As you was on hand when we had our leetle pass with that thief of a wagon boss, you don't have to be much of a prophet to know so much."

"Hold on, stranger! hold on! Hard names, they say, break no bones. But ef Cap he ketches you foul in his kerrackter, he'll skelp you, shore!"

"But that ain't nuther hyar nor thar. You took yer rest all serene last night, an' come to the ford by daylight. Thar they goes down into the water, five shod hosses an' a bar'foot; an' thar they comes up out o' the water on t'other side, all reg'lar, five shod hosses an' a bar'foot."

"Thar wa'n't nothin' no put ier'n that, never, nowhar; an' you takes it in, hoofs, horns an' tail, taller an' hide, an' nary a squirm. Come, now! Ain't that so, pardner?"

"Waal!" answered the sheriff, non-committally.

"Waal!" retorted Black Bill.

"What's quare about that?"

"It strikes me," here interposed Lish, "as thar's one quare thing about it. Whar does that fifth shod horse come in?"

"Oh, that's easy!" cried Bill with a shrug. "It might be an extra man, but it happens as it's only a pack-hoss. The quare thing hain't come in yit."

"Let's have it, then, as soon as ye're ready," said the sheriff.

"I'm 'most ready now, boss. Thar you strikes a poser. You picks it up, an' you holds it in your hand; you close one eye, an' you squints at it, an' you says, says you—*Waal, I swar!* You lays it on the ground, an' you squints at it ag'in; an' you says, says you—*May I be blowed!* You goes back across the creek, an' you hunts about, an' you lays it on the ground over thar. An' you squints at it once more, an' you says—*Ding my hide!* says you. Then you comes back over the creek, an' you goes over it all again; an' you sets down, an' takes your head in your hands; an' you says—*Waal, what in thunder's in it all, anyway?*"

"Slab-sides, he wants to know, but you don't give him no satisfaction. Then you comes on, but you comes on slow. An' you goes into camp when Slab-sides, he's fur pushin' on to Atchison. But you says—*Atchison be blowed!* An' you goes into camp, an' waits. An' when you hears me, you says—*It's a comin'!* says you; an' the heart in your body pounds the livin' soul out o' ye!"

"An' how do you happen to know all this hyar?" cried Lish Losy, in profound astonishment.

"I was powwowed in the cradle," answered Black Bill, with mock gravity. "I've got the gift."

"Finish it up clean, stranger," said the sheriff, coldly.

"What air ye wantin'?"

"What is all this hyar you're givin' us?"

"Only a bit of a yarn about my credentials."

"Your credentials?"

"A paper pattern of a hoss's hoof, skewered with a twig to prevent the wind from blowin' it away."

"An' you left it thar on the trail?"

"Have you got a light, pardner?"

"We kin git one mighty quick."

"I 'lowed to git you to movin'—give me time."

With suppressed excitement the sheriff proceeded to light a fire of grass, which he gave Lish Losy the task of feeding.

Then he took from his pocket a piece of newspaper, which, upon being opened out, proved to be of the shape of a horse's hoof.

It had evidently been placed upon the bottom of the unshod hoof, and creased around with the finger; then wet with the tip of the tongue, and torn to shape.

Black Bill had dismounted.

He now lifted his horse's fore-foot, and taking the paper from Jake Fogg, fitted it to the hoof.

It was evident at a glance that it had been formed on the mold.

"You found," he went on, "that it matched the hoof-prints on this side o' the ford, but it didn't match the hoof-prints on t'other side o' the ford. Then you 'lowed as the party o' six what came up out o' the water on this hyar side wa'n't the party o' six as went down into the water on that char side, an' the whole thing was a clever blind."

"But you didn't stop thar, boss—not you! It don't take a kick from a blind mule fur to drive an idee into your head, like it does with some. I seen that when you was tradin' the time o' day with Cap."

"You'd 'a' gone huntin' that trail up an' down the creek on yer own hook; but you says to yerself, says you: 'This hyar pointer didn't drop down out o' the sky,' says you. 'Thar'll be a chap happen this way before long,' says you, 'what knows more about this thing than I do,' says you. So you lets Slab-sides worret about the hoss he's out, an' you waits. 'It's money,' says you, 'but money ain't nowhar. It's the girl I'm after, an' she's worth a leetle mint.'"

"How much shall I owe you when the girl is in my possession?" asked the sheriff, quietly.

"Owe me!" cried Black Bill, contemptuously. "What in the world good would it do me to have you owin' of me? Blazes! I've got a pile o' fellers—better lookin' than you be, all of 'em—owin' of me already!"

"How much do you want fur your services?"

"Yer pile! I make it a rule to always call a man fur all he's worth. Show me the bottom o' yer pockets—you an' Ole Slab-sides."

"Will a hundred dollars do you?"

"Show it up. Let's see how big it looks."

Jake Fogg hesitated a moment, but with a quick perception of Black Bill's character, which made it as well to deal openhanded with him, he recovered his wonted *sang froid*, and quietly drew forth his pocketbook.

It contained much more than the hundred dollars—so much more that Black Bill's eyes glistened avariciously, and he fairly smacked his lips as he observed:

"Fixed fur all day! That leetle girl's worth a long trip—ain't she? Make it two fifty, boss."

"To be told what I already know?" cried the sheriff, for the first time moved to a display of emotion.

"Oh, no," replied Bill, growing cooler as the other grew warmer. "To be told what you already don't know. An' three hundred dollars is dog cheap."

"But I kin hunt the trail out o' the creek as well as you kin."

"An' lose it ag'in, a heap easier'n you found it. Three hundred an' fifty put up on a sure thing is worth a pile o' money on an oncertainity. You know that."

"Hold on! hold on!" cried Fogg, a growing nervousness, in view of the costliness of this dialogue, betraying itself in his voice, which shook in spite of his evident effort at self-control. "I'm ready to pay you if you earn it; but how am I to know that you really know any more about this than I do?"

"Would I lie to ye fur four hundred dollars, not to speak o' throwin' up my job with Cap Collins. I don't gamble fur wind, boss. I knowed thar was a bar'l o' money in this thing, or I wouldn't 'a' put in my bid."

"When the girl is in my hands," said the sheriff, in a voice choking with suppressed rage, "I will pay you your price."

"Cash down, stranger. I don't sport no slate. I told yeso before. Plank the sugar—"

"And let you run away with it," returned the sheriff, hoarsely.

"You'll have to chance that; an' fur your resk you git a discount o' ten per cent. Ten off of five hundred is four hun—"

"Never!"

"Cap, that leetle word cost you an even fifty dollars. I'm tradin' fur a round five hundred now, an' I'm lookin' fur a quick taker."

This crisp dialogue was of so surprising a character to Lish Losy, that he forgot his fire, and stood staring with open mouth, and ears that he could scarcely credit.

In the rapidly diminishing light, as the grass fell to ashes, Jake Fogg saw Black Bill's swarthy face fade from view, till only his glistening eyes and gleaming white teeth, bared by his tantalizing smile, seemed left suspended in mid-air.

The effect was diabolical, and sent cold shivers down Lish Losy's back.

He almost jumped out of his boots as the sheriff roared at him:

"What's the matter with that thar fire?"

In great trepidation he piled on a few hasty handfuls of grass, and blew it into a flame.

Then, without a word further, Jake Fogg counted out five hundred dollars, and put the money upon Black Bill's itching palm.

He did not waste breath menacing the recipient, against the chance of his attempting to run away, but in his eyes there was a look of murder.

Black Bill did not borrow trouble on this score. Whatever defects of character he might have—and "their name was legion"—a lack of physical courage was not one of them.

"I'm obleeged to ye, boss," he said, as he coolly folded the bills, and put them into his pouch. "That thar leetle beauty had orter be worth a heap more o' money'n this to somebody, but I'm satisfied with my sheer. It's a blasted shame to hand her over to sich a crowd as I'm afraid you represent, but then, I must live!"

And forthwith he set out to betray Rose into the hands of her enemies.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SHERIFF DOWN.

"THAR ain't no use in goin' back to the ford," said Black Bill, "when we kin make a clean cut across the perrairie, an' strike the spot whar Bareback Buck came out o' the water."

"Bareback Buck?" repeated the sheriff, inquiringly, this being the first time he had heard the name.

"The fancy fella as Cap Collins put in charge o' the runaways," explained Black Bill. "Now, I've ranged this hyar section with Bareback Buck till me an' him knows all the crooks an' turns in it, an' when Buck he runs to cover, I know jest the hole to smoke him out of."

"But, Cap, it's only fair to give you warnin'. Bareback Buck is a tough cuss to handle!"

"I reckon I've handled as tough in my time."

"An' this hyar money don't include no fightin' fur me. I point him out to ye, an' you wade in. Ef he gits away with ye, that's your funeral—not mine. I ain't no life insurance company."

"You do what you've agreed to do, an' I won't ask no more o' you."

"Foller me close, then, an' you'll have all the fun ye want, before mornin'."

The sheriff was not confident that this was not an emissary of the wagon boss, sent to divert him from the trail.

Granted that the trail on the hither side of the creek had been made by six decoys, as Black Bill had intimated, might not the whole thing, including this seeming desertion, be a plot the more fully to win his confidence, and so to send him on a wild-goose chase till Bareback Buck

had had time to get beyond all chance of successful pursuit?

However, Jake Fogg adopted the policy of giving them rope, and keeping his eyes open.

Holding himself in readiness for any emergency, he rode hard at the heels of Black Bill, till he announced that they had reached the point where Bareback Buck had left the stream.

"Strike a light," he said, "an' I'll show you their sign, as neat as ye want it."

All dismounted; a bunch of grass did service as a torch; and a short search discovered the trail they were in search of.

"Thar ye have it," declared Black Bill—"six shod hosses an' a bar'foot. Match that thar paper what you've got with this hyar hoof-print, an' you'll see thar's the same difference that thar was between the sign on opposite sides o' the creek."

Jake Fogg did as required, and satisfied himself that so far Black Bill had kept to his contract, and this was indeed the trail so cleverly blinded at the ford.

"Ye see," continued Bill, "as it comes out on this hyar eastern side o' the creek, an' goes off to east'ard. Waal, ef you was to foller it up, you'd find as it lost itself ag'in in the reg'lar southern trail out o' Atchison; an' you'd naterally b'lieve as the runaways had abandoned their idee o' goin' with Cap Collins, an' gone off to Leavenworth, or some o' them."

"Thar's jest whar you'd be out. Bareback Buck is a cunnin' fox, an' the way he doubles is a caution to man. This hyar sign is over a day old, an' yet he ain't much more'n a gun-shot away from this very spot. You'll have a chance to pick him up before sun-up. Ef he flaxes you, that's your lookout."

Not yet thoroughly convinced, in spite of favorable appearances, of Black Bill's trustworthiness, Jake Fogg followed him without opposition.

Lish Losy, on the other hand, was in ecstasies.

"Mister," he cried, with a swelling heart, "ef I git that hoss back, I won't furgit you in a hurry!"

"The question is—will you give me somethin' so's I sha'n't furgit you in a hurry?" laughed Black Bill.

Lish grinned, but made no promise.

So they rode on till about midnight, when Black Bill again called a halt.

"Now," he said, "it'll stand us in hand to go slow. Bareback Buck ain't a hundred mile from hyar, an' I'll prove it to ye."

He dismounted, and was imitated by the sheriff and Lish Losy, by his direction.

Then shaking out his blanket, he gave a corner to each of them to hold.

"You stand on t'other side o' this hyar blanket," he directed, "so's no light won't strike on your legs, nor nothin'. Then you squat, so's to keep your heads below the top edge, while the bottom edge drags on the ground. Then you move along stiddy an' slow, till I call a halt."

They complied to the letter, while he on the other side of this improvised screen searched the ground by the light of a bit of resinous wood that he found.

Presently he announced:

"Thar she am, gents! Now we'll change places, an' you kin satisfy yerselves."

He extinguished the light, and then gave place to Jake Fogg, though Lish Losy was devoured by curiosity.

The sheriff examined the ground, and found the trail as before—five shod horses and a bare-foot.

By comparing the paper pattern of Black Bill's horse's hoof with the imprint here stamped into the ground, he saw that it presented the same differences as on the western side of the ford.

He could not doubt that this was indeed the trail of Bareback Buck and the runaways, and that Black Bill was proving himself faithful to his contract, iniquitous as it was.

"Jest take a close squint at that thar sign," pursued Black Bill. "It is fresh an' damp. The airth wa'n't broke long enough before sundown fur to give it a chance to dry out."

This Jake Fogg verified.

"Waal, now," concluded Black Bill, "'lowin' as Bareback Buck would go into camp by dark, how fur should you reckon he'd be from hyar?"

"Near enough to justify your precautions," admitted the sheriff, for the first time fully yielding his suspicions.

"That's all I want to byear," said Black Bill, with the same heartiness. "Now I reckon me an' you'll begin to pull together."

"Show me a square deal, an' you'll find me a square man," declared the sheriff.

"Waal, then, to begin with, this hyar ain't no time fur to go fur Bareback Buck. He's got a gun what goes off by accident about this time o' night; an' then somebody's past weepin' fur. In the mornin', jest at daybreak—that's the time we want to take him; when he kin see the seal on them papers you'll be sarvin'. Buck he don't know no sheriff in the dark."

"An' I'll tell ye what I'm up to between now an' then, gents. I hain't had no proper sleep sence night before last, an' then I was on picket fur half the night. An' I've got it in me to put

in all the time that way as I git the chance to, till I git ketched up. Ef you fellers want to keep guard, you kin divide it between ye. That ain't in my contract. But ef I git to snorin' loud enough fur to notify Bareback Buck as we're a-comin', jest you give me a poke in the ribs, an' I'll quit.

"Meanwhile, gents, to our good luck in the mornin'!"

He prew the stopper of his canteen, inverted it over his mouth, and appeared to drink deeply, snacking his lips as he passed the canteen to the sheriff.

As a matter of fact, he did not drink a drop of the liquor.

Suspecting nothing, Jake Fogg drank, as bound by the code of good-fellowship observed among drinking men.

He made a wry face over the quality of the liquor, but passed the canteen to Lish Losy without comment.

Lish drank and criticised:

"That thar's got the tang to it, but I reckon Atchison ain't a prime place fur whisky."

Black Bill laughed, as he received back the canteen, and appeared to take another nightcap.

Then he rolled himself in his blanket, and was soon snoring rhythmically.

The night previous had been too full of suspense to permit Lish any really refreshing sleep, and he now declared that he felt as if he had not had forty winks in a fortnight.

"Now we're startin' to clap onto that boss in the mornin'," he concluded, "I'm goin' to git to feelin' good, so's I kin enjoy it."

Jake Fogg resolved to keep awake. Everything seemed fair enough, but his naturally suspicious disposition led him to hold out against even the most suspicious appearances.

He began to pace up and down, listening to the various sounds of the night—the restless movements of the horses, the snoring antiphonal between Black Bill and Lish Losy. For Lish seemed scarcely to have touched the ground before he was fast asleep.

Turning from this with impatience, the watcher began to forecast the events that awaited them on the morrow.

The situation was not altogether void of anxiety, even for the iron-nerved border sheriff. It was plain that there was a determined resolve to defeat his object, on the part of men who had little respect for the authority he represented.

Would they stop at evasion; or, being cornered, would they make that last stand which puts all men on an equal footing?

But Jake Fogg was not the man to be daunted by this ominous prospect. On the other hand, the more obstacles accumulated, the more stubborn did his dogged persistence become.

He clinched his iron jaws, and swore within himself that, if it came to fighting, he would maintain his authority at the mouth of the revolver.

No living man should have it to say, that Jake Fogg had been backed down by the show of force.

Even as he hurled this defiance at his enemies, he was conscious of a lack of his wonted vim. He was fagged out. His body was playing the traitor to his indomitable spirit.

One of the weary horses lay down with a grunting sigh of relief.

The effect on the sheriff was even greater than when creatures of his own kind escaped weariness and anxiety through the door of sleep.

He felt that every participant in that protracted struggle, save only himself, had succumbed to the natural strain.

And he was tired—oh, so tired! Had he ever known such weariness in all his life before? At any rate, what was the use in wearing himself out, when he could relieve his leaden limbs of the burden they almost refused longer to bear? He might sit down and save his strength even if he did not sleep.

He sat down, leaning his back against a tree, and that was the last he knew of his pains and trials. Sleep stole upon him like a thief in the night, and the doughty sheriff was her prisoner.

There was a lull in Black Bill's tribute to Morpheus—a very natural one. You would have thought that he was only taking a respite to gather strength for a louder blast on his nasal "bazoo." As a matter of fact, he had just caught the first faint forerunner of a long series of resonant snores from the captive sheriff.

He waited till their long-drawn music denoted perfect oblivion. Then he reached out his foot, without changing his posture, and gave Lish Losy a gentle push.

As this produced no effect, he gave him a decided shove, then a vigorous kick.

Lish only snored the louder.

"He's fixed," said Black Bill to himself. "Now fur the Puke sheriff. I reckon he can't stand doctorin' no better."

He rose to a sitting posture, craning his neck to peer through the darkness. He could dimly discern the shadowy figure at the roots of the tree.

He rose, crept toward it, and touched it on the shoulder.

"I say, pardner!"

The sheriff did not leap to his feet in suspicious vigilance. He made not the slightest response whatever.

Black Bill pushed him, so that his back slipped past its support, and he rolled on the ground.

Jake Fogg continued the heavy snoring of a drugged man.

"Waal," chuckled Black Bill to himself, "it come in mighty handy to have the stuff to doctor that whisky. I knowed it would stand me in somethin' purty, one o' these days. So I jest naterally hung to it. An' now I see my chance, an' went fur it."

From Jake Fogg's saddle-bags Black Bill drew forth two pairs of handcuffs, and with the greatest *sang froid* put the sheriff in his own irons, securing his wrists with one pair and his ankles with the other, then throwing away the keys.

"You're the chap I'm wantin' to git shut of," he remarked, as he completed the work, "an' I reckon I've fixed you fur a while. I'll truss up Ole Slab-sides with strips from his own blanket, enough to hold him till I'm safe; an' ef you kin gnaw him free, that's your chance fur life. It would be a dog-gone shame fur to leave you two hyar to starve, without no show at all."

He made very secure bonds by twisting the strips into which he tore Lish Losy's blanket, and tied him hard and fast in them.

Then leaving the other horses to go free, he took his own and left the spot.

Though he had declared that Bareback Buck and his party were encamped near, he rode a good three or four miles along the trail, picking his way by landmarks discernible in the darkness, since the trail itself was indistinguishable, before a greater caution indicated that he was approaching the point for which he had set out.

At last he dismounted on the banks of a stream, and tied his horse to a sapling.

He now began to creep down along the bank of the creek, stopping to listen and to lift his head like a snake out of the grass, and peer around.

He heard the occasional movement of a horse, which assured him that those he sought were there.

The camp was well chosen for security. It was in a bend of the creek, in the midst of a chaparral isolated from the growth of trees that followed the banks of the stream above and below.

The trail, which Black Bill had abandoned at some distance back, approached the stream at this point at right angles; and a single sentinel stationed where it entered the chaparral could not only guard that direction, but overlook the open spaces above and below the chaparral along the banks of the stream.

The only possible access to the camp, if the sentinel was vigilant, was from the water side.

Black Bill stretched himself flat on the ground, and wormed his way a little distance out into the open space, though not so far as to get entirely out of the shadow of the trees.

There he looked and listened, and listened and looked, fairly holding his breath.

He heard some one snoring in the camp.

There was another faint sound of snoring that came to him—so faint that, at first, he could not locate it.

Finally, by keeping his eyes intently fixed upon a spot where he believed a sentinel would be posted, he thought he could make out a shadowy figure seated at the foot of a tree, perfectly motionless; and by disregarding the louder snoring, he fixed the fainter sound upon this figure.

"Asleep!" muttered the spy to himself. "I don't want nothin' better'n that. Ef I kin bag Bareback Buck, I kin manage them boys with bluff. Ef worst comes to worst, an' they try to kick up rusty, I kin knock 'em in the head. Anyway, I'm the boy to try it on."

With a snake-like motion he wriggled back to cover. Then a prolonged silence followed. Not a sight of moving object, not a sound save those made in the camp.

Deep, deathlike stillness, and then, of a sudden—

CHAPTER XIX.

'BIJAH STANDS GUARD.

So many incidents—all, however, as will be seen, necessary for the full development of our story—have been detailed since we left those in whose fortunes the interest of the reader is especially bespoken, that it may be well, perhaps, to recapitulate the circumstances in which we left them.

It will be recalled that, after having blinded their trail in Seven-mile Creek, Bareback Buck called a halt to the eastward of the point where they left the stream, and there went into camp; that Cass was put on guard for the first half of the night; that he received a scare from what he believed to be some one stealing upon him in the darkness; and that he was on the point of firing at the skulking figure, when a voice interposed with:

"Hold on, my Christian friend! We don't

throw away good powder an' ball like that on the prairie."

To say that Cass jumped, would be to "draw it mild."

Instead of coming from the object in front of him, the voice was at his very elbow, and the laughing speech was almost completed before he realized that it was the voice of Bareback Buck.

Cass dropped the cock of his rifle at once, with a decidedly sheepish feeling.

He did not need to be told—the tone of Buck's voice did that—that he was somehow ridiculously in error, and that the danger that had made his hair rise and sent cold chills down his back was purely imaginary.

"What is it?" he asked, in a tone which showed Buck that he had grasped the situation.

"You took it for the sheriff, or a lot of pesky Injuns, didn't you?"

"Well, maybe I did think it might be an Indian, but I wasn't so much afraid of Jake Fogg."

"Because you happen to know him. Waal, one o' the first lessons to learn in the life you're goin' to, is that a man ain't any the more terrible fellow simply because you don't happen to know him, nor any more harmless simply because you do happen to know him—or fancy you do. Now, I sized up this Fogg at Atchison; an' you hear me, he's about as bad as they make 'em. He may not be quite so quick on the trigger as some. That's only because he don't happen to have been in the way of it. But if you fancy that he'd go any the lighter on you because you are your father's son, and he knew your father, thar's whar you're out. He's a bad egg, an' you'd better look out fur him."

"But I didn't set out to lecture, an' I'll only stoy to say that your Injun was a coyote. They are our watch-dogs, an' as long as you hear them jabberin', you may rest easy, there's nobody skulkin' about. But when everything is quiet, then look out."

"I didn't suppose I was such a fool," said Cass, in deep chagrin. "Don't give it away to—"

But here, instead of attending to him, Bareback Buck gave a quick leap toward the center of the camp.

"Hold on, pardner! It's only me," exclaimed the voice of no less a personage than 'Bijah.

"Only you," repeated Buck. "And what air you doin' out o' your blanket at this time o' night, when it ain't your watch?"

"M, waal, I jest happened to see as thar was somethin' goin' on, an' I lowed I'd like to be in it, along o' the rest of ye."

"Then you haven't been asleep?"

"N-n-not adzackly."

'Bijah spoke with evident embarrassment, keeping up his wonted grin the while; though that was thrown away in the darkness.

Buck would have given something for the chance to study his face. There was something about this interruption that arrested his attention.

"Waal," he said, dryly, "you was mistaken—Thar ain't nothin' goin' on that would interest you. I was only havin' a last word with Cass. So you kin go to sleep as soon as you like."

"Waal, I reckon I will," answered 'Bijah, and went and lay down again.

"What did he come out hyar for?" Buck asked Cass, on a sudden impulse.

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Cass, quite frankly, "unless, as he said, he saw you getting up, and concluded that there was something doing. He has a great notion for some Indian-fighting."

"He has, eh? Waal, maybe he'd git his fill before he sees the States ag'in. Is that the reason he carries a young arsenal about with him, in the way of bowie-knives?"

"You'd ought to see him use 'em! And that reminds me—I don't think you know him yet. He ain't such a fool as he looks."

"I'm glad to hear it—for his sake."

"Oh, now, it won't do to take that stand, you know," protested Cass, earnestly. "You'll be the worst-fooled fellow you ever saw, if you don't look sharp. One of these days he'll wake up your ideas with a round turn, by doing something that you'd never expect of him. Everybody has made just the same mistake. Why, we owe everything to the contrast between the outside and the inside of 'Bijah."

Cass laughed at his whimsical way of expressing himself, and then detailed the whole of their adventures to a very interested listener.

Bareback Buck was one of those rare individuals who are willing to receive a suggestion from any source. At the same time, he did not act upon it till he had submitted it to his own judgment.

He was much impressed by what Cass told him, and resolved to keep an eye on 'Bijah.

He went and lay down, and after some minutes' thought, said to himself:

"I wonder, now, if I have been taken in by this fellow, and he has a great deal more in him than I supposed. He certainly got up and followed me so cautiously that I had not the slightest warning till a twig snapped under his foot. That might have happened to the best of us."

"If he got up because he saw me get up, he must have been dogging my steps to watch me,

for I had been up a good ten minutes, and maybe more, before he betrayed himself. Then, when I sprung back upon him, he had one of those bowie-knives in his hand. What was the meaning of that?"

Buck lay and pondered this matter a long time, the more since his setting Cass to guard the camp was a mere sham.

In point of fact, he himself was keeping watch, trusting to the cessation of the sounds of life about him to warn him of the approach of an enemy.

At midnight he arose with the greatest stealth, and crept toward Cass with all the caution of a crafty Sioux.

When he had made perhaps two-thirds of the distance between Cass's post and the spot where he and 'Bijah had lain, at a small remove from Rose and Mart, he turned his head so as to look over his shoulder, without pausing in his creeping advance.

It was so dark in the chaparral that, while the figure of a moving man could be dimly discerned, it could not be determined whether his face or his back was toward the spectator.

Therefore, any one following Bareback Buck would have no warning that he was not intent upon the object toward which he was advancing.

By this trick, Bareback Buck made a discovery.

At every few steps that he took, he saw a dim figure flit noiselessly from tree to tree, so as to keep at about the same distance behind him, yet run the smallest possible risk of being detected by his looking round. For when the figure stood still beside a tree-trunk, it was indistinguishable.

Paying no further attention to this figure, concerning which he had now fully made up his mind, Buck stopped at a little distance from Cass, and watched him for some time.

Cass stood with his back against a tree, the stock of his carbine on the ground between his feet, and his arms resting on the muzzle.

Now and then a slight change of posture showed that he was awake. Once Buck caught the sound of a slight yawn. Cass was tired, yet vigilant.

"Waal, Cass, it's about time you'd turned in, ain't it?" asked Buck, now advancing to the sentinel.

"Is it midnight already?" asked Cass.

"Oh, no! You can't come that on me," laughed Buck. "You ain't a bit sorry."

"Well, to be downright honest with you, I don't believe I am," admitted Cass, laughing in turn.

"No more Injuns?"

"Oh, well, you'd better do all your shouting about that while you have the chance. But I may get even with you, one of these days."

"Waal, you go turn in, an' we won't say any more about it. But you'll have to put in your time for the rest of the night for all your worth, if you 'low to catch up with that fellow who is with you. I reckon he's gittin' ready for tomorrow night. We'll put him at it, anyhow, an' see what he's good for."

"You'll find 'Bijah thar, every time," was Cass's assurance.

Then, after the exchange of a few more words, Buck let him go.

Cass found 'Bijah apparently putting in his time for all it was worth, and having assured himself that Rose and Mart were sleeping soundly, he lay down, and had scarcely touched the ground when tired nature claimed her due.

Cass had scarcely left him, when, abandoning his post, Bareback Buck crept into the chaparral by a circuitous route, which enabled him to get within sight of the sleepers, yet off the line connecting his post with their position.

In making this change of place, he did not walk through the chaparral, but crept along the ground, as cautiously as if evading an enemy's camp.

He was not in time to see Cass lie down, but when the boy's heavy breathing showed that he was wrapped in sound sleep, Buck saw a figure rise and creep with the greatest stealth toward the sentry's post.

Buck followed this figure as he himself had been followed earlier.

Of course it could be no one but 'Bijah who was moving in this way.

Having gained a position from which he could see what had the appearance of a man squatting at the root of a tree with his rifle between his knees, 'Bijah watched the object for perhaps a quarter of an hour, and then went back and lay down beside Cass.

If, instead, he had advanced and examined this supposed man, he would have found that it was only a dummy, consisting of a bush and Bareback Buck's blanket and hat, which he could have disposed of the rifle it supported without the slightest protest.

Once again before daylight, standing in the depths of the chaparral, Bareback Buck saw 'Bijah rise and creep forward to inspect the situation.

This time the sentry appeared to 'Bijah to have changed his position, now standing with his back against a tree—not the same at the foot

of which he sat—and still, as before, on the look-out over the trail they had traversed.

This time, had 'Bijah examined the dummy, he would have discovered that the bush had been stuck in the muzzle of the rifle, and this skeleton wrapped in the blanket and topped with the hat.

Suspecting nothing of this, nor of the watcher who had followed his every movement, 'Bijah went and lay down, now satisfied for the night.

In the morning, though Cass was as chipper as a bird, 'Bijah, looked worn; and Bareback Buck inferred that he had not slept, unless during the hour or two after that second reconnaissance.

But you may believe that Bareback Buck did not spend much time in studying the "moods and tempers" of 'Bijah Losy, when he had another subject of pre-eminent interest at his very elbow.

Rose was a revelation of fresh beauty.

If Buck had admired the grace which the languor of her long day's ride had given to her movements, he was now enchanted by the sparkling vivacity imparted by the night's refreshment.

"Well! well!" he exclaimed, as, her face rosy from its morning bath in the cold waters of a rivulet that trickled through the chaparral, she smiled her greeting upon him, "you look like a landscape after rain."

And this was a most apt comparison, and the prettiest compliment he could have paid her.

The breakfast was a gay one, in spite of the anxieties hanging over them, Rose laughingly eking out the rather scant bill of fare by giving different morsels different names.

"It must be in the air," she said, remarking upon her lightness of spirits.

"Whether the influence is from the heavens or the earth," replied Bareback Buck, gazing into her eyes, "it is equally welcome."

"I reckon it's of the earth earthy," she responded, withdrawing her eyes from his a little hastily. "It must be my appetite."

"But mine is gone," laughed Buck, "yet I am happy all the same."

Then into the saddle, and away!

If there is anything in the world to make the heart light, it is a morning scamper across the plains, with the sun, not yet in view, filling the eastern sky with opaline tints.

They rode straight toward the glory of the dawn, till, about noon, they reached a well-traveled road, running southward of Atchison.

Here their trail was lost in the myriad hoof-prints going in both directions.

Along this road they galloped southward, till they reached a second ford, where, turning against the current, they continued in the bed of the stream till Rose suggested that they had made an oversight in not providing themselves with a boat.

"It wouldn't stand us in much further use," said Bareback Buck. "Do you see that slanting rock? That's whar we leave the keen sheriff a nut to crack. If he picks up the trail we leave thar, he'll have a sharper nose than I believe he has."

"Now, then, one at a time, please, and the pack-hoss first."

He rode up on the slanting rock, and dismounting, sent Pard back into the water with a word.

Then the led horse was passed to him, and taking from his pack a good gray blanket, he deliberately tore it into patches.

"Well," cried Rose, so surprised that she did not choose her words, nor heed the trap into which they were leading her till it was too late, "if that's your style of housekeeping, I should hate to keep—"

But here she came to a dead and very rosy standstill, all because Bareback Buck suddenly raised his eyes to hers, with a merry twinkle in them.

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that he hoped she would change her mind about that, when she came to see how provident he was, as a rule.

But, instead of adding to her embarrassment, he covered her retreat by saying:

"Oh, it don't cost so very much to keep me in blankets. I don't have to blind a trail in this way every day."

Rose raised her eyes to his again, with a glance that repaid him for his forbearance, and then watched with lively interest the process of muffling the horses' feet, so that their hoofs would leave no trail on ground that was somewhat stony.

One by one the horses were led up on the sloping rock, provided with blanket moccasins, and sent forward, till the whole party had left the stream, with no trace after the stone had dried off.

In this proceeding 'Bijah had lent his assistance, with a quickness to learn and execute that interested Bareback Buck in him more than ever.

"And now," said Buck, when he was once more on Pard's back, "westward, ho!"

But their progress was slow, till they had got a sufficient distance from the stream to make it safe to remove the mufflers from their horses' feet.

Then they rode as before, till nightfall saw them encamped in the elbow of a stream, where a chaparral grew with open spaces above and below, as we have already described; for this was the camp which Black Bill visited later in the night.

His knowledge of their movements made all their precautions futile; but of course Bareback Buck could not be expected to forecast such treachery.

His purpose was to evade the sheriff, and he had laid a trail which no one could have followed without hounds.

"Cass," said Bareback Buck, when it came time to set the watch for the night, "I'm goin' to do somethin' that'll strike you as a mite queer, but I'll explain later."

"All right," replied Cass. "I'm not much of a soldier, but I know enough to obey orders without waiting for my superior officer to give me all the whys and wherefores."

"It's a mighty good thing to know jest when to stand for reasons, and when to be satisfied without 'em," answered Buck. "But what I'm goin' to do is, to put you on guard for the first half of the night, an' 'Bijah for the last half."

"I don't see anything queer about that."

"All right, if you don't. I'll explain, all the same, when the time comes."

The fact was that, having gone almost entirely without sleep for several nights, and intending to keep his eye on 'Bijah during his watch, to satisfy himself finally as to his trustworthiness, Bareback Buck wished to get a few hours' sleep before midnight.

Cass stood his watch till midnight, and then called 'Bijah.

Bareback Buck lay breathing heavily, like a man thoroughly tired out, and both Cass and 'Bijah were careful not to wake him.

Himself almost as much in need of sleep, and feeling as if the rest he had got during the early part of the night had only made him more tired than before, 'Bijah entered upon his vigil.

"If I ever git whar people lay in beds ag'in," he said to himself, as he took up his task, "I bet I'll know enough to put in my time fur all it's worth. The time I've fooled away on coons would keep me goin' now, ef I only had the good of it."

The horses had been picketed close to the chaparral, where they could graze, and yet be near enough to the guard so that no one could steal upon and stampede them. Only Pard moved about at will, no lariat restraining him.

They had lain down to sleep; and shortly after the change of guard 'Bijah made his way into the chaparral, and sought his master's side.

This was the lonesome season of vigil. Everything with which the watcher had any companionship seemed wrapped in forgetfulness. Tired out, Cass was snoring lustily. Bareback Buck, it seemed, slept quietly.

Buck had promised himself three or four hours of undisturbed sleep during the first part of the night, while Cass watched. But the fear that, once asleep, after the long strain to which he had been subjected, he would not rouse at midnight, to watch 'Bijah and prove that he was worthy to have the safety of the camp intrusted to him, preyed upon his mind so as to banish "tired nature's sweet restorer."

Then he got to thinking about Rose, and her vicinity to him, and trustful dependence upon his protection; and do what he would, he could not woo the drowsy god.

He shammed sleep when the guard was changed, but after Cass began to snore, he threw off all pretense, and set himself to watch 'Bijah.

An interference came, in the approach of his horse; and stealing back to his place, he feigned sleep, and deceived the animal.

This was to induce Pard to lie down naturally, and so run no risk of attracting 'Bijah's attention.

Then, giving the animal the signal to lie quietly, he returned to his post.

For the next two hours the camp was under a double vigil. Then, reprehending his own folly in this over-caution, Bareback Buck went and lay down, to get what rest he could before morning.

His mind now relieved, he fell asleep almost as soon as his head touched his horse's flank.

All unsuspecting of this espionage, 'Bijah sat or stood for hours that seemed interminable, listening to every sound, on the watch for any moving object.

At last, when he had the watch really to himself, he sat down, and sat motionless for a long time. Then, in that darkest hour before dawn, a suspicious circumstance occurred.

The sentinel, had he been vigilant, would have seen nothing, heard nothing, suspicious. On the contrary, it would have been just the reverse of that. On his left, up the stream, it became ominously quiet—that was all.

After a long interval a dim shadow moved slowly and noiselessly out into the clear space that separated the chaparral in the bend of the stream from the growth of timber further up.

We know that this was Black Bill, and that,

having listened to the snoring in the camp, and satisfied himself that the weary sentry too was dozing, he crawled back into the shelter of the trees.

Down into the water he went, holding his belt and weapons above his head, and screening all with a bush, and so floated down with the current.

The bush grounded at the chaparral, in the shadow of the trees that overhung the water. The man emerged slowly, and crept ashore, to stand immovable by a tree-trunk till his clothes had ceased to drip.

Then, bowie-knife in hand, and with his revolvers ready to his clutch, he crept toward the spot whence the snoring yet proceeded with unabated regularity.

He had gone not more than half a dozen steps, when, as he was about to pass what seemed to be only the trunk of a tree, he was seized, and almost before he could offer resistance, thrown to the ground.

In an instant every muscle of his body was electrified into mad activity, and he was writhing in the most desperate struggle of his life.

Some one who must have been very near was about to interfere, but he heard his antagonist say, hoarsely:

"Cheese it, pardner! He's my meat, and I've got him!"

CHAPTER XX.

A PLAUSIBLE PRISONER.

ALL of a sudden, without the slightest warning, Bareback Buck had started out of a dreamless sleep into perfect wakefulness, with every faculty sharpened to the keenest attention.

At first he supposed that his horse, startled by some suspicious sound, had roused him; but the moment he turned his attention to the beast, he discovered that he yet lay undisturbed.

Without lifting his head, Bareback Buck listened, throwing his attention in various directions.

Cass was snoring at his side; Mart was breathing heavily at a little distance, where he lay near his sister; Rose slept so quietly that no straining of the attention could detect her breathing. No sound came from 'Bijah, on guard; nor from any other quarter such as to cause alarm.

It was not what he heard, but what he failed to hear, that at last brought Bareback Buck to his feet—the suspicious stillness up the stream.

In a moment Buck was gliding through the chaparral, to see what the guard was about.

'Bijah sat motionless, with his back against a tree, keeping vigilant guard—if indeed he was awake—over the trail along which an enemy might be expected, but apparently heedless of everything else.

"Asleep!" said Bareback Buck to himself, with intense disgust, "or, what is about as bad, ignorant of what he is to look out for."

Without disturbing him, Buck set himself to watch for developments.

He saw the figure of Black Bill come out from the shelter of the trees, and pause to reconnoiter. Then he heard, coming from the sentinel, the first faint snores of a man who was sinking into that profound somnolence which can be dissipated only by a vigorous shaking.

"The dolt!" muttered Bareback Buck, in contempt and anger. "A pretty fellow to set on guard! He might do to guard sheep—in pasture! But, as between him and me, I don't know which is the bigger fool. This comes of yielding my first impressions. We have been saved by a miracle!"

Bareback Buck was not more superstitious than people generally, but his having roused from a deep sleep just in the nick of time seemed to him unnatural, and he looked upon it as "a warning."

Yet this was quite easily explained, as are all supposed supernatural interpositions, once all the facts bearing on the case are known.

Though sufficiently reassured to permit of his going to sleep, yet he had not fully trusted 'Bijah, and even in sleep his attention had been on the alert. Then the habitual association of the idea of danger with the cessation of certain sounds had been sufficient to rouse him with a sense of alarm.

Without stopping to philosophize about this, however, he set himself to capture the spy, intending to let the taking of the enemy while he slept stand as a silent rebuke to the faithless sentry.

What was his surprise, then, to see 'Bijah suddenly glide from his position, as soon as Black Bill had returned to the cover of the trees, preparatory to making his descent upon the camp from another quarter?

Could it be that he had detected the spy, after all, and had only shammed sleep, to decoy him within reach of capture?

So quick were 'Bijah's motions, though noiseless as the gliding of a serpent, that Bareback Buck had no time to get out of his way without exposing himself to discovery.

He had to stand still, and trust to escaping notice by reason of 'Bijah's not being on the lookout for any one in the chaparral.

'Bijah passed to the northern side of the chaparral, sufficiently within its borders to run

no risk of detection by the spy in the adjoining growth of timber, and there watched vigilantly.

When the innocent-looking bush appeared floating on the surface of the stream, he kept on around, and took his stand within a few paces of the bank, identifying his body with the trunk of a tree.

"Waal," said Bareback Buck to himself, as he cautiously followed a smaller circle, so as to keep near enough to see the progress of his maneuvering, "Cass was right. He ain't such a fool as he looks!"

Bareback Buck was one of those generous natures which like nothing better than to be agreeably disappointed in another. His admiration, when deservedly won, was hearty and without a reservation. He now took stock in 'Bijah, and was not only willing, but desirous, that he should win the glory of this undertaking without interference.

He liked the nerve and self-reliance that did not alarm the camp at the first sign of danger. He understood and appreciated 'Bijah's desire to prove himself, by effecting this capture without rousing the others, if possible, so that he could tell them of the peril and their safety at the same time.

He admired the coolness with which 'Bijah waited till he could spring upon and overpower the intruder at a bound. Then he sprung forward, to interfere only if he saw that 'Bijah was likely to get the worst of it.

But no aid was needed. Black Bill lay unconscious, stunned by vigorous thrusting of his head against the root of a tree, and in a twinkling his captor had him securely bound.

"Well done! well done!" cried Bareback Buck, heartily, seizing and wringing 'Bijah's hand, while the others, roused by the noise of the struggle—for it had been a terrific one while it lasted—came flocking to the spot in great trepidation.

Rose, pale and trembling with alarm, clung with her arms about Mart, who was divided between the fear natural to his years and his desire to play the man's part.

Cass, his weapons in readiness, was blaming himself for allowing all this to happen while he slept.

'Bijah proved that even the sweets of triumph could not distract his attention from the real business of the moment.

"Whar thar's one o' these fellers, thar may be more," he said hastily. "Cass, you take the north side, an' I'll go to the south, an' we'll both keep an eye to the east'ard. An', Cap, you size up this chap, an' see what you kin make of him."

He was off almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth, and, catching the infection, Cass ran to the post assigned him.

There were more points than one in this arrangement which struck Bareback Buck.

Believing that the enemy, if there were more than one, would divide their forces and approach the camp from different sides, 'Bijah had chosen for himself the post of danger and also of responsibility, leaving Cass the side where there was least likelihood of attack.

On the other hand, he had left to Bareback Buck the part which called for the most judgment.

Here was modesty tempered by a just appreciation of his own powers, coupled with good sense.

Bareback Buck dragged the prisoner into the center of the chaparral, and there, with the assistance of Mart, inclosed him in a sort of roofless tent, formed with blankets thrown on the bushes.

"You're mighty careful of him," remarked Mart, who was of an inquiring turn of mind. "I reckon it's to keep the dew from falling on him."

"No," answered Buck. "I'm lookin' out for number one. I shall have to strike a light to take this fellow's measure by, an' I think too much of my skin to set myself up as a target when it ain't necessary."

"Well, there's something in that," admitted Mart, philosophically.

"An' for the safety of yourself and your sister, I shall have to ask you to go out thar by that bush an' lay flat on the ground."

They complied, Rose clinging to Mart's hand, and murmuring:

"Oh, isn't it terrible? What do you suppose he's going to do to him?"

"If he'd cut the heart out of him, he'd serve him right!" declared Mart, truculently.

"Oh!" gasped Rose, with a shudder.

"We'll bear what goes on, if you'll only keep quiet," observed Mart, with a brother's disdain of feminine timidity. "And you needn't hold so tight on to me. I sha'n't run away."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mart Crawford!" was Rose's reproach.

Then they listened with all their ears.

They saw the glimmer of the light which Buck struck, and then heard his surprised ejaculation:

"Oho! So this is you, Black Bill!"

"That terrible man who frightened me so!" breathed Rose, in dismay.

"It ain't nobody else, Buck," answered Black

Bill, in a tone that indicated neither hostility nor anxiety, but only the unconcern of acquaintanceship.

"Waal, I must say that you're a bird of a different feather from what we expected to catch in our springle."

"Ef I'd 'a' knowed fur sart'in as it was your springle, I wouldn't 'a' put my foot in it as I have done. More'n that, once in, ef I'd 'a' knowed it was you as had hold o' me, I'd 'a' come down, like Davy Crockett's coon."

"I had hold of you? Not much!"

"Who was it, then?"

"The same that took the tuck out of you day before yesterday."

"That hay-seed?"

"A better man than you, Bill. He's proved it, twice."

"Waal, he's got away with me squar'—once drunk, an' once sober. I don't bear him no malice fur that. I hadn't no call fur to go fur the leetle lady like I done, an' I wouldn't 'a' done it ef I'd been myself. She begged me off, like a good one; an' Cap he crossed off the score, or I wouldn't be hyar a-tellin' ye of it."

"Now we're comin' to the point. How does it happen that you come sneakin' into our camp like this?"

"It do look quare, don't it, pard? But it's all right, notwithstanding. This lyar's the way the thing stands."

"That thar Puke sheriff an' Ole Slab-sides follered you up hot-foot, strikin us jest before sundown. Cap he opened up, an' showed 'em around like he was the ring-master in a menagerie. But the keen eye that thar Puke sheriff had in his head! You bet yer sweet life he didn't leave no scrapin's when he got through."

"But that ain't the worst of it. Now maybe you don't believe as that thar sheriff picked up your trail. But he done it, all the same; an' he went at it like an old hand. He set Ole Slab-sides to huntin' back tracks in the wagon-trail, an' he circled around, takin' of us all in. Slabby picked you fellers up, an' clucked over it like a settin' hen. Then the sheriff he got down on his marrowbones, an' took the size o' one o' the tracks with a bit o' paper."

"I reckon he must 'a' spotted you comin' out o' Atchison, an' missin' you at the train, dropped to the hull thing. Five shod horses an' a bar-foot—ye see he had ye down fine. That is, 'lowin' as it was Pard's measure he was takin'."

"Waal, Cap he got narvous at that, an' he says—'Boys, we can't let the thing go so.' Then he calls fur six good men. An' I steps forward with a lot more, an' I says—'Cap,' says I, 'you'd orter let me into this thing, so's I kin make it up to the leetle lady fur my tom-foolishness this mornin',' says I."

"Cap he'd done the handsome thing by me, bein's as the leetle lady had begged me off, an' said let hy-gones be hy-gones. 'Ef we're all goin' to cross the plains together,' says he, 'we'd better do it peaceable all round. You behave yerself in the future,' says he, 'an' we won't say no more about it.'"

"An' I says—'Cap,' says I, 'set me down from this out fur the straightest man on the job, an' I'll do jest the purtiest I know how. An' I'm obleeged to ye into the bargain,' says I."

"So Cap he counts me in, all the more bein's as I sported a bar-foot what we all allowed come about as nigh Pard's sign as ary one in the train."

"Mississipp', he was along, an' Ans' Matchin, an' Rufe Haggerman, an' Deadwood, an' Cock-eye Blodgett; an' Cap he laid our course to the north'ard o' the trail, to git into an' out o' Seven-mile Creek without the sheriff spottin' us, like as if you had kep' right on across the creek. An' on t'other side we was to put off in a chaparral, to look like you chaps had bid to let the sheriff pass."

"Oh, Cap he got it all down fine, an' we put 'er through fur all she was worth."

"But Cap he wa'n't done yit. He 'lowed ef that sheriff was sharp enough to size up Pard's hoof, he was sharp enough to see whether the one on the t'other side o' the creek dotted down to the same lines. Thar's whar he'd git So Cap he says to me:

"'Bill,' says he, 'when you fellers strikes the ole rout', jest you shake Mississipp', an' Ans', an' Rufe, an' Dug, an' Blodgett, an' you go six or eight mile down the creek, till you come to a chaparral in a half-moon bend—not a boss-shoe, mind,' says he, 'but a half-moon bend, standin' all alone by itself. Right along thar some'rs you'll pick up Bar'back Buck.'"

At this point the story was interrupted.

"How did Cap know as I would be hyar?" asked Buck, watchfully.

"That I don't know, Buck," answered Black Bill, with all seeming frankness.

"Jest what did Cap say to you? Can you remember his exact words?"

Bill looked meditatively at the light a moment, and then replied, slowly:

"Waal, I 'low it was about as I told ye. It might be a mite more or less, but that was the heft of it, sart'in."

"Go on."

"Waal, I says to him: 'Don't you tell me nothin' about Seven-mile Creek,' says I. 'That's my ole stampin'-ground. I kin go to the chap-

arral what you've got in yer mind's eye blind-folded."

"Then, Cap he says: 'Wade in! But,' he says, 'don't you walk in on that thar sheriff, an' give him the time o' day, or you'll knock the hull combination higher'n Gilderoy's kitel!'"

"An' I says: 'Ketch me wakin' up the wrong passenger!' An' then we come away."

"Waal, we fixed things harnsome, ef I do say it, as had a hand in it. Then, accordin to Cap's orders, we laid low, an' put in a half-day o' snoozin' an' pipe-smokin' jest off the ole rout', so's nobody shouldn't see us, an' give us away to the sheriff. Then Mississip', an' Ans', an' Rufe, an' Deadwood, an' Blodgett, they pulled out fur camp ag'in, an' I made a big swing round the circle to this hyar place, to make sure o' clearin' the sheriff an' Ole Slab-sides, ef they was still nosin' around that leetle blind."

"But I couldn't know fur sart'in but they'd smelt a mice, an' got down on you hyar, an' you be further on. I couldn't go huntin' no trails with no perrairie fire fur a candle; so I jest sneaked up hyar an' made out somebody a-settin' off yan, on the aidge o' the chaparral, an' somebody else a-snorin' on the inside of it."

"I harked an' spied, an' spied an' harked, an' fur the life o' me I couldn't see nor hyear nobody but jest them two. An' I says to myself, says I: 'Lowin' as that thar's the sheriff, an' the galoot snorin' like a deacon under the pulpit is Ole Slab-sides, I reckon hyar's as good a place to leave 'em alone as any other.'"

"Now, I wa'n't walkin' in on no Mister Sheriff; but I lowed ye could knock Ole Hay-seeds off the perch with one o' his own rakes, an' he'd only reckon the wind had blowed the barn-door open, an' 'u'd roll over an' go to sleep ag'in."

"So," concluded the narrator, with true oratorical pungency, "I slips into the water, an' wakes up—in blazes!"

Bareback Buck passed no criticism upon this story, but asked, quietly:

"An' now, what did Cap send you to me for?"

"Firstly, I was to tell you how the land laid; an' secondly, Cap lows you'd better bear more to the south'ard, an' not to show hide nor hair o' yerselves unless ye git grub-struck bad. At the Republican he'll send you a resupply; an' ef thar's anythin' pertic'lar ye want besides, you're to tell me, an' he'll send it along then. The women folks lowed as the leetle lady would want more clo'se, 'lowin' as she don't carry no Sarrytogie trunks along, an' they're willin' to let her have any thing at all what they've got, as she'll be good enough to name. I could 'a' fotched along a hull clo'se-line full o' duds, ef I'd 'a' took 'em. Ye see, they're all struck on her good looks an' inmercent ways. But Cap, he says he won't make no dry-goods drummer out o' you before he knows as you're in need. So hyar I be, empty-handed, but fur good will."

"Oh, how kind they all are!" breathed Rose into Mart's ear.

"Is that all?" asked Buck, in what seemed to Rose a strangely cold tone.

"That's all I've got to say to you," answered Bill, "but before I go back I'm minded to ax the leetle lady to disremember my foolishness. I wa'n't myself nobow. I always was a hog when whisky got the best o' me. But I know what's what, ef I ain't a shinin' light on the anxious bench; an' I know as it ain't everybody as would ax Cap to let up on me after I'd give 'em sich a skeer. But I'll make it up to her all the way to the Rockies. She kin'tie to Black Bill, you bet!"

Rose was so affected by this homely confession of error, with resolves of amendment, that she longed to rush in and give the rough diamond both hands, in forgiveness and friendship.

What was her surprise when, instead of releasing Black Bill, with expressions of regret at the rough handling he had received, Bareback Buck, without a word further, blew out the light, and whistled for Cass and 'Bijah to come in from their posts. But this was increased to a feeling very akin to indignation by what followed.

Black Bill said, in a tone of surprise and injury:

"Look a' hyar, Buck—ain't it about time you let me out o' this hopple?"

"I'll think about that," answered Buck.

"Think about it!" repeated Bill, indignantly.

"What is thar to think about?"

"A good deal. It's a long story to swallow all at once."

"A long story? Swaller?"

Bill affected bewilderment very well, considering that acting was not particularly in his line.

After a pause he went on, more collectedly:

"Do you 'low as it ain't a straight one?"

"It don't do, in these uncertain times, to take no chances."

"What's the matter with the story?"

"Nothin'."

"Waal, then, what air you tryin' to git through ye?"

"Nothin'; only, I'm very anxious to make no mistake."

Black Bill pondered this awhile, and then said:

"H'm! Waal, this hyar's a queer go, I

swar! I ride two nights an' a day to do the best I kin by you, an' I git tied up fur it! I reckon Cap'll laugh. He'll 'low as I've got squared up fur skeerin' the leetle lady, after all."

To this Buck made no reply, but as 'Bijah and Cass now made their appearance, he said to them, briskly:

"Boys, have you seen anything?"

"No," was the report of both.

"Waal, then, the sooner we git out o' this, the more chance we'll have, maybe, to save our bacon. Thar's no time for talk now. We'll have all day for that, if we don't git bagged sooner."

Neither of the boys needed a second bidding. No camp was ever struck more quickly than that one, unless by more experienced hands.

"Buck," said Black Bill, when everything was in readiness, "you ain't goin' to lose me my hoss jest through this hyar quare notion o' yours?"

Buck stopped and thought a moment, and then said:

"I'd rather make a mistake on that side than on the other. If I'm wrong, I'll pay for your loss."

"Boys, share the plunder on that pack-hoss among the lot of us, and we'll mount his nubs on the best we've got handy."

It was done. Then into the saddle and away! Rose Crawford's favorable opinion of dashing plainsmen, who rode bareback horses and played the agreeable to young ladies in distress, underwent a sudden chill.

"It's terrible how rough they all get!" she said to herself. "They have no consideration for anybody!"

CHAPTER XXI.

BLACK BILL'S OPPORTUNITY.

THEY rode without stopping for breakfast till the sun was three hours high. Then, having reached a motte situated on a slight eminence from which they could look back over their trail for miles, Bareback Buck announced his readiness to "give them a rest."

Thus far they had had only a cold bite to stay their stomachs, and what with the brisk ride and the bracing air, they were fairly ravenous.

Rose did not interfere in Black Bill's behalf, but she showed her disapproval of what she considered Bareback Buck's unreasonable rigor, by treating him with a little less warmth than hitherto.

Buck was quick to notice this, but he was proud, and so made no effort to justify his course, but trusted to time to vindicate him.

The result was, that their conversation was coolly polite, and entirely foreign from what lay nearest both their hearts.

No reference whatever was made to Black Bill, directly or indirectly.

During the breakfast halt, his hands were freed, but his feet remained in a hopple; and Buck warned the boys not to allow themselves to get within reach of the prisoner, no matter what pretext he might resort to, to decoy them to him.

Buck put Bill's case to the boys just as Bill had stated it himself, and both would have been entirely won over by its plausibility, but for Bareback Buck's evident doubts.

"But I don't see how such a story as that could be made up," said Cass. "What's the matter with it?"

"That is exactly the question Bill himself put to me," replied Buck, frankly, "an' I shall have to answer you as I did him. Nothin' is the matter with it. It is an entirely likely story. It is jest what one would expect. It is just like Cap. If my life depended on pickin' a flaw in it, I reckon I couldn't do it."

"Well, then," cried Cass, opening his eyes wide with amazement, "this seems to me the strangest way of repaying a service I ever heard of."

Instead of expressing his opinion, 'Bijah asked a question.

"What makes you hang on to him?"

Buck looked at him thoughtfully, and answered with quiet deliberation:

"I have only the slenderest thread of an excuse for what I have resolved upon. I don't see any reason to doubt this story, any more than you do; but then, I don't know that it is all right; and I would rather keep Black Bill in a hopple for a week, without the slightest justification, than take a shadow of risk in this matter."

"What!" cried Cass, "do you intend to keep him like this for a week: and all the time he may be the best friend we have—the one who has done, and wishes still to do, the most for us?"

"If I prove to be mistaken, I shall have to make it up to him somehow."

"It will be a job! I wouldn't thank anybody to do anything for me, after they had held me a prisoner a week, for only a whim."

Cass did not mean exactly what his words implied—that Buck was following out a whim.

Buck said nothing further, nor did 'Bijah. Only before they set out again, Buck said to Cass:

"I want you to do me a favor. Don't say anything to your sister about this matter; and if she questions my conduct, don't try to justify it, or to explain my reasons—or want of reasons as you may look at it."

Cass readily assented to this, and they resumed their course.

Before mounting, however, Buck set Black Bill entirely free, only remarking, so low that nobody but him heard:

"Bill, you know me. I've seen some ups an' downs in the wild life we lead; but I've tried to behave myself, an' so far I've never killed a man. I should hate to have to begin now."

That was all; but words so few and simple have seldom conveyed more meaning.

By Buck's direction, Black Bill rode in advance of the party. He was unarmed. Otherwise he did not differ in appearance from the rest.

As if to put the greatest distance possible between them and the scene of the last night's adventure, Buck pressed forward with unflagging persistence till nightfall, making it the most trying day experienced by any of those under his charge, and at its end they were all tired out.

Black Bill was again bound, Bareback Buck himself doing the work, and doing it well.

They camped in a motte, growing up around a spring drained by a rill so small that one could easily step across it. Otherwise the prairie was treeless all around them.

The horses were picketed on the westward side of the motte, so that they could not distract the attention of the watcher by their movements, nor be exposed to the view of any one following their trail.

While placing them, with the help of 'Bijah, Bareback Buck had a conversation with him over which he had been mulling all day.

"'Bijah," he began, "I want a few straight answers out of you."

"Waal, sir, you'll git 'em—if I answer you at all."

"What made you watch me night before last?"

"I watch you?"

'Bijah preserved his countenance very well, considering that the question was sprung upon him, and he had to meet it under the searching eye of Bareback Buck.

"Yes," answered Buck. "For which," he added, with a smile, "I returned the compliment last night."

"You watched me?"

"Exactly."

"An' what in the world did you watch me fur?"

"Ain't we gittin' this thing turned around? Let us start ag'in whar we begun. Why did you spy upon me night before last?"

"But did I spy upon you?"

"You certainly did."

"What makes you think so?"

"I watched you an' caught you at it."

"The time Cass got his skeer over the coyote? But I told you as I wanted to be in the doin's."

"Exactly. An' you was so anxious to find out what was goin' on, that you took ten or fifteen minutes to think whether you'd better let me know you was awake and at my heels; an' then you wouldn't have done it but for the snappin' of a twig under your foot, that gave you away."

"Oh, waal! I don't believe in makin' a row when maybe thar ain't nothin' doin'."

"So it seems. Yet you are so anxious not to miss anythin' that might happen to turn up, that, after I had relieved Cass, you go up twice before morning to satisfy yourself that everything was quiet."

"How did you know that?" asked 'Bijah, in no little surprise.

"I have eyes in the back of my head," answered Buck coolly.

"Waal, I've been thinkin'," pursued 'Bijah, shifting the subject cleverly, "as it was a mite quare how you come to be so nigh when I grabbed this hyar Black Bill, as you call him."

"Come, come, 'Bijah!" said Bareback Buck. "It is time you an' I came down on the square, an' I'll set you the example. I don't mind ownin' up that I was out on you. The first eye-opener I got was when I found that you had gumption enough to hang on my heels for ten minutes an' I not know it. After that Cass gave me some points, an' then I got right down to steady business to size you up; an' while you was seein' that a dummy, made of a bush an' a blanket, wasn't up to any tricks, I was back in the chaparral, with both eyes on you, all the while."

"Did you play me sich a trick as that?" asked 'Bijah, with some chagrin.

"Beggin' your pardon for the liberty!" laughed Buck. "I almost made up my mind about you then, when I found that you wasn't sleepin' as if you was in a barn-loft. But I like to have a sure thing when I go in for all I'm worth; so I laid for you again last night. What I saw then has satisfied me. Now I kin sleep easy with you on guard."

"Waal, I am obleeged to ye, pardner!" said 'Bijah with deep feeling.

Never before had he felt that he was appreciated at his true worth; but the indorsement

of such a man as Bareback Buck was recognition enough.

"An' now," asked Buck, "what was you after me for?"

"Waal, pard," answered 'Bijah, "you've been straightfor'ard with me, an' I'm bound to be straightfor'ard with you; but ye must excuse me, ef I hurt yer feelin's—which the same I hain't no notion to. But, ye see, I've undertook to take Miss Rosy out to her sister, Miss Beth; an' the thing weighs on me, an' makes me want to be mighty partic'ar."

"Now, I've done enough hoss-tradin' to know as it don't do to trust nobody too fur; an' bein's as everybody is unbeknownst to me, I'm bound to look 'em over purty middlin' keeful—onefurme, an' two fur Miss Rosy—before I tie to 'em solid. Cap Collins, he looks all fair, an' everybody's got the same good word fur him. An' then you looks fair. I hain't no word to say ag'in' ye. But thar ain't nothin' like makin' sure in this hyar world; an' beggin' yer pardon fur the same, I've been tryin' to get you down to whar, when I got my finger on ye, you'd be thar—every time!"

"Come!" cried Bareback Buck, cordially extending his hand. "You an' I haven't had any sleep for the past two nights; an' I reckon for some time before that you haven't had much more than I have. Now, if you're satisfied that you've got me whar you kin tie to me, we'll call it a go; an' we'll put in a snooze to-night that will make up for old an' new. Cass will stand guard till midnight, an' I'll take the mornin' watch. You put in your time from sun to sun. You need it. Pard, what do ye say?"

'Bijah gave Buck his hand, and as he stood thus, for the first time on an equal footing with a man whom no man would presume to discount, his figure became erect, and his face took on an uplifted expression that made even Buck start in surprise.

Here was no fool, but a man of marked intelligence and courage.

Cass was informed of the understanding that had been established between the two, and expressed his satisfaction.

"It's a pity to put you on guard every night," observed Buck. "To an outsider it would look as if we two were playin' off against you."

"What difference does it make how it looks," asked Cass, "so long as the fact is that you fellows have been watching two to my one?"

"You must find it lonesome, not bein' used to it. Suppose you have Mart to keep you company? He'll be proud of the chance."

"Hugh! As if I had to have company!" cried Cass, scornfully. "When I want Mister Mart, I'll let him know."

"Waal, I reckon we'll have a quiet night of it, anyway," concluded Buck. "I don't expect to hear from the sheriff, whether he got on to our trail, or not."

So Buck and 'Bijah lay down to their first real sleep, free from anxiety, for several nights, and Cass, as tired as he was, undertook to "prop his eyes open" while they slept.

Alas, for Cass! That last unthinking remark of Bareback Buck's, to the effect that he did not apprehend trouble from their pursuers, relaxed his sense of responsibility, and handed him over to the traitor, sleep! The long strain of anxiety and unaccustomed loss of sleep, followed by that hard day's ride, had exhausted him more than he realized, as long as he was braced up by the feeling that safety was at the cost of unremitting vigilance. But with the feeling of security at last—for he insensibly made more of Buck's words than the speaker had intended—a reaction set in; and poor Cass had scarcely sat down for a minute's relief to his weary legs, within an hour of the time when all the rest of the camp, as he supposed, was wrapped in profound slumber, before he dropped off into a drowse from which he was destined never to wake of his own accord.

But, though Buck and 'Bijah and Mart justified Cass's supposition, there were two wakeful ones in the camp, in spite of the exhausting labor of the day.

Black Bill had enough on his mind to make almost any one wakeful.

"Hyar's a rum go!" he told himself. "If they take me back to Cap, what becomes o' my clever story? I jest naterally laid myself out on that yarn, an' I never 'lowed as I could lie so convincin'ly. The hull thing dovetails in so smooth, I'm blowed ef I could sw'ar what's true, an' what's 'all yer eye, Betty Martin!' That jest shows as it pays to tell the truth—a part of it, anyway! Buck 'lowed himself as it was like Cap. You bet it was—the part Cap actually done!"

"The leetle beauty, she's on my side, an' is feelin' mighty bad to see me used so rough. She won't rest easy till we've begged pardon all round, an' swore as thar wa'n't never no sich friends as we're 'lowin' to be from this out. An' the boys, they'd let up on me, only fur Buck."

"What makes him hang on to me is, that nature's jest a-warnin' of him. Thar ain't no sense in it—he 'lows that. But he feels it in his bones. An' what a powwow thar'll be when he sets me down in front o' Cap, an' axes him whether he's got to pay fur that hoss an' sundries, or take me out some'ers an' shoot me!"

"An' the bottom may fall out o' the hull blame thing at any minute. Mississip' an' them is bound to git back to camp, an' report as I've lost 'em. Ef Cap, he 'lows I've gone back to Atchison, sick o' my job, he may leave me a free swing o' my rope fur a while; but ef he drops to ary snide business with the sheriff, he'll have the boys down hyar before to-morrer night—an' don't you furgit it!"

"Waal, now, I reckon I ain't hankerin' arter none o' that, an' I ain't layin' hyar fur a lot of 'em to put their heads together to pick out what's what in that yarn—not ef I kin help it!"

The camp was disposed as usual, Mart lying beside his sister's hammock, and Buck and 'Bijah at a little distance. Black Bill lay by himself, at a like remove from the others, so that they may be said to have occupied the corners of a triangle.

The purpose of this arrangement, was to guard against the chance of Bill's rolling near enough to any one, without rousing them, to get possession of a knife, and so, possibly, free himself.

Black Bill listened. He had no difficulty in distinguishing 'Bijah's breathing. It was the deep, sonorous snore of a man who worked hard during the day, and slept like a stone at night, without a disturbing recollection of yesterday, without an anxious thought of the morrow.

Mart slept with the heavy breathing of a healthy boy. It would require shaking to rouse him before his nap was out.

Bill had to listen with the utmost attention to distinguish Bareback Buck's breathing. He slept with his mouth shut, from having cultivated the habit. His alert mind never quite relaxed its vigilance over his body and its surroundings, so that there was a certain tension of the muscles, even when he slept most soundly.

Therefore he did not snore, yet there was a difference between his breathing when awake and when asleep; and in the long-drawn, deep, regular oscillation Black Bill recognized the evidence of as complete oblivion to his surroundings as a man of that character ever reaches.

What were the surprise and delight of the prisoner, not long after, to hear the sentinel snoring at his post.

"Now's my time," he cried to himself, "ef it ever come to mortal man! Ef thar's sich a thing as shakin' these ropes, I'll find it."

He began to tug at his bonds. He strained till it seemed as if they gnawed to the bone. In spite of himself a groan escaped him.

The next instant he was electrified by the sound of some one stirring.

CHAPTER XXII.

ENTRAPPED.

BLACK BILL lay perfectly still and listened. Presently it came again. He could not be mistaken—Rose was awake and restless.

Her tender sensibilities on the rack, the girl, tired as she was, had found it impossible to sleep.

Her bones ached with the strain of her hard day's ride, only to make her think how much more distressing her situation would be, if she were held to a cramped position in bonds.

The more she thought of Black Bill, his offense, his repentance, his service, and the base ingratitude, as it seemed to her, with which it had been requited, the more she longed to do something to mitigate his hardship, and to show him that she at least did not share Bareback Buck's suspicions.

When she heard him groan, she started up in her hammock as if some one had struck her.

She listened. All was quiet again. Black Bill was cursing his folly in allowing a groan to escape him, when everything depended upon his caution, and, if the whole truth must be told, cursing her also for her wakefulness at so inopportune a moment.

She lay back again, and tried to quiet her conscience with the plea that she was not responsible for Bareback Buck's acts, and had no right to go counter to his judgment. Yet she could not forget that Black Bill was suffering on her account.

She could not sleep, nor even lie still, so the prisoner knew that she was still awake. But as such a chance as this might never occur again, after Bareback Buck had had one good rest, he resolved to make the most of it, and so continued to strive against his bonds.

But Buck had done the work to stand, and it would take manipulation from the other side of those knots to loosen them.

At last Black Bill realized that this was so, and then he hit upon a desperate resolve.

"Needs must when the devil drives!" he quoted. "It's my only show, an' it can't fix me worse than I'm fixed now. Bar'back Buck means business, or he'd never gone into the thing at all, an' he'll never let up on me till Cap says it's all right. An' you bet Cap'll never say that word!"

Though, abandoning the hope of being able to free himself, he had ceased to struggle, and so inflict self-torture, Black Bill deliberately groaned.

Again he heard Rose start up.

He waited a while, and then uttered a lower moan, and moved as if seeking some more comfortable position.

This was continued at intervals, till poor Rose could endure it no longer. Peering through the darkness, she listened. Every one was asleep. She could go on this errand of mercy, and no one but the man whose sufferings she relieved be the wiser. If she could only get him into an easier position, or give him a drink of water, she would feel better.

She slipped from the hammock so lightly that not even Black Bill, who was listening, heard her. In a moment she had flitted to his side.

"My poor man," she whispered, bending over him, "can I do anything for you? Oh, you don't know how sorry I am!"

"Oh, Lord love you, miss—is that you?" Bill whispered back. "Don't bother with me. I'm all right. Only I'm right glad to have you offer it, all the same. It shows the tender heart you have. To think o' your layin' awake, troublin' yer pretty head about me! But git back an' go to sleep without lettin' Buck find ye out. He'd blame ye fur meddlin' with his doin's."

"Oh, I hope you will believe that you should not be treated like this if I could help it."

"No more I would; though I'd feel better if you'd hit me a crack fur what I done to you. An' you beggin' me off with Cap!"

"But don't you be too hard on Buck, neither. He means all right. Me an' him has been old side-pards long enough so's I'd ought to know him. I don't bear him no malice—not a bit of it! An' ef you knowed the tricks that was played on these hyar plains, you'd say he'd done jest right in not trustin' his own brother. He's doin' it all fur you, miss; an' I reckon ef the shoe was on the other foot, an' Cap had put me in charge o' ye, instid o' him, an' he was to come to me like I done—I reckon, I say, I'd 'a' tied him up jest the same. Ye see, he's got to give ye up to Cap ag'in, safe an' sound; an' Cap he don't fergive a man fur makin' no mistakes."

"Oh, this is all so terrible!" breathed Rose.

"It's the hit-an'-miss o' life, miss. We all have to stand it, now an' ag'in."

"But you are in pain. Can't I do something to relieve you? Even a drink of water?"

"Waal, now, it's kind o' you to think o' that, miss. It ain't so easy layin' hyar in one shape all night long; an' a man will git dry."

"I heard you groaning."

"A man will do that in his sleep once in a while. I reckon it's because I've got my hand under me a mite uncomfortable."

"Can't I turn you over?"

"You! Sich a mite! An' me as heavy as a buff'er-calf! I reckon you'll have to let out the job, miss. But don't call nobody. Buck wouldn't want women botherin' with his work. I'll grin an' bear it till mornin'. That won't be so long now."

"Let me try."

"Waal, ef you will, I'll thank you kindly, an' make myself as light as I kin. Thar, miss!—thar!"

Kneeling beside him and feeling over his body, Rose found that, besides the ligatures that confined his wrists and ankles, a rope had been tied about his waist, the other end of which was fastened to a sapling, so that he could not roll from the spot.

This rope was long enough to give him a restricted freedom of movement; but in shifting his position, in pursuit of the comfort that kept eluding him, as she supposed, he had got it so twisted about him that he could not roll forward because of its restraint, nor backward for the tree.

With nimble, though trembling fingers, she loosened the knot that held the rope, and as he rolled over on his face with an apparently involuntary sigh of relief, Black Bill arrested her with the caution above quoted.

"Thar, miss—thar! Don't furgit how that was tied, so's you kin git it back unbeknownst to Buck, after you git me untwisted."

Now that she had begun to work, Rose grew bolder. She felt that she could justify herself, even if Buck discovered her.

Her next thought was to chafe his hands. They must be numb with arrested circulation of the blood.

The moment she touched them she discovered that his wrist was greatly swollen and lacerated.

With a shudder she recognized the glutinous touch of blood, and snatched her hands away with a little cry of horror.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "those cruel ropes have torn your wrists! They are bleeding!"

"Don't mind that, miss. A patch o' hide more or less don't matter; an' ef you call that losin' blood, I'd like to byear what you'd say to gittin' shot, or stuck with an eight-inch bowie. That's bleedin', that is!"

Rose shuddered.

"Oh, how can any one bring himself to treat another so cruelly!" she murmured.

"Maybe the ropes is a mite tightish," admitted Bill. "Buck understands his business. But I've tied up men worse'n this myself, afore now; so I ain't growlin'."

Rose could not understand such an indifference to pain. And how could a wronged man

suffer thus without resentment; simply because a certain caution was justifiable in another, when that other carried it to this unreasonable extreme?

"But couldn't they be loosened—just a little bit?" she asked, the last qualification prompted by a sudden thrill at the responsibility she was taking upon herself.

"I reckon you hadn't better meddle with 'em," answered Bill. "Buck 'ud be sure to know it in the mornin'. He ties his knots jest so; an' ef you was to fidget, an' git one twist wrong, he'd know he never put a knot in that shape. I'm obleeged to ye, miss, more'n I kin say, fur your good will. But I'd be a mean cuss—excuse me, miss, but that's jest what I'd be—ef I was to git you in a scrape with Bar'back Buck, after the row I made with you day before yistiddy, an' you beggin' me off with Cap, an' then comin' hyar an' fixin me as comfortable as you know how. No, miss; you ain't science on tyin' knots; an' after you'd ontied one o' them, you wouldn't know how to git it together ag'in. You let them go till mornin', an' I beg off from Buck fur to-morrer night."

With this subtle raising of objections in a way that at the same time suggested how they could be avoided, he led her on, while seeming to follow her with reluctance.

"But I can loosen them," she urged, "without entirely untying them—just enough to make you easier."

Bill hesitated.

"Waal, miss," he said, finally, "ef you could ease up a mite on the left one, which the same it does pinch jest the least taste in the world. Ah, thar! It's amazin' how much better that fee's."

Of course she loosened both while she was about it.

"Now pull them knots tight ag'in, like Buck left 'em," he cautioned her. "Put yer foot on one end o' the rope, an' lay back with both hands on the t'other. Don't mind me. It'll make me scinge a mite, maybe, jest while ye'r at it, but I'll feel easier all night, an' thank you with every breath I drawer. Don't fidget that tether. Tie it to the saplin' like you found it."

She did everything as he directed, only being careful not to hurt him, and therefore leaving the knots in a condition that must inevitably betray to Buck the fact that they had been tampered with—if he ever had a chance to inspect them!

Then she expressed again her sorrow at all this suffering on her account.

"Don't mention it, miss!" Bill interrupted her. "But did you say a word about gittin' me a drop o' water? If you could do that, without wakin' up nobody—"

Of course she could; and she set out at once, her heart swelling with such gladness as she had never before felt, though this was not her first kind act, by any means.

During her brief absence Black Bill did some of the quickest work of his life.

To slip his hands out of his loosened bonds was no task at all; but he could not so easily have freed his feet, had he had no other resource than his fingers.

But Black Bill went "heeled" for just such an emergency as this. From between the lining and the outer leather of his boot-leg he drew the broken blade of a bowie-knife, which in this place of hiding had escaped the observation of those who had disarmed him, and a few rapid slashes left him a free man.

Replacing the knife-blade, he rose, and after three or four noiseless strides in the direction in which Rose had gone, pressed his body against a tree-trunk.

She was returning with the light step of a sylph and the full heart of an angel of mercy, when, in passing him, she was snatched up off her feet, and a hand pressed firmly over her mouth, the finger and thumb of which closed her nostrils.

She could not utter a sound. Though she struggled desperately, her limbs beat the air, touching nothing but Black Bill's body, and so producing no noise.

In an agony of terror indescribable, she felt her strength and consciousness ebb together. Then came oblivion!

Holding the unconscious girl in his arms, the triumphant ruffian was just indulging in a diabolical chuckle at his success, when he heard the stumbling step of some one approaching in the darkness.

The excitement of securing Rose and a vigorous box on the ear from one of her flying hands, had prevented him from discovering that any one was astir, until the step was just at hand.

He had scarcely time to crouch to the ground with his now limp and motionless burden, when a voice, the quality of which indicated that the speaker was half awake and half asleep asked:

"What's the matter, Rose? Where are you? What are you doing?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TABLES TURNED.

MART! In the very moment of his triumph, after scheming with a subtlety that he looked back upon with keen admiration, was Black Bill

to be balked by this lad—and he half-stupid with sleep?

To be outwitted was one thing. Bill had enough of the gambler spirit about him to accept defeat of this kind with a good grace. But to be "downed by fool luck" enraged him.

Letting go Rose's limp body, he made a spring for the drowsy boy, like a cougar dropping from the limb of a tree upon the shoulders of a fawn, and had him in his clutches before he woke to a sense of peril.

As his fingers closed upon Mart's throat, he had but one thought—to strangle him to death on the spot.

Mart was as helpless in the grasp of the burly ruffian as his sister had been. Indeed, he did not struggle so desperately as she had. Taken in his sleep, as it were, he was paralyzed with fear.

But Mart was a boy, and he did not faint. He only stared with open mouth and protruding tongue at the dusky figure of his murderer.

Before he reached the point of suffocation, Black Bill had time for reflection.

He had no interest in killing the boy. On the contrary, aside from the folly of needlessly making a hunted outcast of himself, he could gain what he was after only by keeping himself free from blood-guiltiness.

The moment the first mad impulse of desperation abated, he saw that he could yet accomplish his object, without increasing the gravity of his crime.

"Harkee, my lad!" he whispered hoarsely into Mart's ear. "I hain't nothin' ag'in' you ef you don't stand in my road, but I'll tear the heart out o' your body ef you give me away! One whimper out o' you—d'ye feel this hyar?"

And drawing the bowie-blade again from his boot-leg, he laid the cold steel against Mart's throat.

"I'll slit yer weasand from eend to eend, an' skin ye inside-out through the openin'!"

He set Mart on his feet, turned his face toward the west, shoved him a step or two beyond the spot where Rose lay, and commanded him:

"You keep agoin' till I tell ye to stop; an' ef you peep onc't, or trip over a twig, or wake anybody up in this hyar camp by ary kind o' nonsense at all, you'll git this hyar knife clean through you, so quick you'll never feel it! Mosey!—an' don't you turn yer head, nuther!"

By some chance Mart had roused from sleep just enough to reach out his hand and discover that Rose was not in her blanket hammock. Then, hearing voices whispering, and taking it for granted that one was hers he had got up and stumbled toward the sound, but with no recollection of where he was, or sense of impending danger. He sought her only from force of the habit of being near her.

Now, in the confusion of personal fear, he quite forgot her. He had not seen her, and certainly had no such thought as her sharing his peril.

If he had guessed the real state of the case, it is probable that his devotion to her would have overcome his fear, and he would have roused the camp to her rescue, at any hazard to himself.

Not knowing, he did as he was bid; and picking Rose up in his arms, Black Bill followed at his heels.

The saddles and the stores that the pack-horse had carried, afterward distributed among the various horses to make a mount for Bill, were on the border of the chaparral nearest where the animals were tethered.

Here Bill halted his young prisoner, keeping him still with his back toward him, and laying his burden on the ground, tore slips from a blanket, and blindfolded and gagged the boy.

He then put a saddle and bridle upon his shoulder, and ordered him to carry it forward, himself following with Rose.

They returned with another man's-saddle and Rose's side-saddle, Bill carrying the latter, and such other articles as he chose.

A minute later they were mounted on Skit, Seat and Jin, and were walking them cautiously away.

Black Bill would have taken the other horses with him, but he did not care to burden himself with them, knowing that, mounted on the best, save Pard, he had none to fear but Pard and his master; and while Pard looked on with unconcern at the departure of the other horses, he would not have allowed any man to take him from his master.

Once out of ear-shot, Black Bill pressed the horses to their greatest endurance. He must have a certain start before the Centaur of the Plains came thundering on his track.

Black Bill was now armed with the weapons which he took from Mart. Rose's little revolver he threw away, not caring to bother with such a toy, effective only at close range.

As Rose was unconscious, he carried her on his saddle-bow, her horse being led by Mart. But once fairly clear of her rescuers, should she scream, he restored her to life with water—the very same she had brought him in her canteen—and spirits.

What was Mart's despair when, the gag being

removed from his mouth and the muffler from his eyes, he discovered that his beloved sister snared his captivity.

"Oh, Rose—Rose!" he cried, throwing his arms about her.

"Where am I? What has happened?" asked the girl, in the first bewilderment of returning consciousness.

"Happened!" repeated Mart, with a groan.

"The worst thing possible! We have been taken prisoners by the fellow that 'Bijah captured! Oh, Rose! what will become of you?"

Brushing her hand before her eyes to clear her vision, Rose started to her feet and gazed about her.

She stood on the open prairie, with nothing but the flat earth below and the star-gemmed arch of heaven above.

Near her she could discern the shadowy forms of three horses, and a man whose face was indistinguishable in the darkness.

"Who are you?" she demanded, peering at him as she clung trembling to her brother.

"Bill Dorn, at your service, miss," replied Black Bill, taking off his hat with a bow and a scrape.

"You?—you?" she repeated, wonder and reproach in her voice.

"You're 'lowin' as I'm a purty tough case—ain't you, miss?" returned Bill. "But ef you'll be so good as to git into the saddle, we'll talk the matter over as we go along. We hain't no time to lose, an' that's a fact."

"Into the saddle, to be carried away from my friends by you?" cried Rose, burning with indignation. "I refuse. To think of your repaying my kindness with such treachery."

But here, remembering that she had brought this misfortune upon her brother and herself by going counter to Bareback Buck's purposes, and recalling the injustice she had done him, the event having proved the wisdom of his course, she burst into tears.

"I want to do the best I kin by you, miss," said Bill, his voice hardening just enough to show that he could resort to more vigorous measures if persuasion failed, "but one thing's sart'in—we've got to be gittin' on. Talk's a good thing, but time's money."

"But you have no right to carry us off like this. We have never done anything to you."

"Thar hain't but one question on the plains, miss—Kin ye do it?"

As he spoke, Bill took the bridle of her horse, and led the animal before her.

"I reckon we'll have to do as he says," whispered Mart. "But if I ever get a crack at him, I'll let daylight clean through him, or my name ain't Mart Crawford!"

Rose only sobbed in despair.

"Don't touch me!" she cried, as Black Bill undertook to help her into the saddle. "Don't you dare to!"

He grinned—a wicked grin, if she could have seen it—but desisted.

Mart did the service for her.

She kissed him, flinging an arm about his neck, just before rising into the saddle, and whispered:

"Forgive me, Mart! Oh, I'm so sorry!"

"I don't see what you had to do with it," answered Mart. "He just picked me up out of my sleep, and here I am!"

And, truth to tell, Mart had been frightened out of all recollection of what had immediately preceded his capture. His drowsy impressions of getting up to follow Rose were entirely erased from his memory.

As he saw no reason for reserve, he spoke aloud, and so Black Bill got his cue gratis.

"You will believe, miss, as I ain't so bad a feller, after all. I had to git out o' Bar'back Buck's clutches—thar wa'n't no two ways about that; an' to git off, I had to clap on to you rougher'n I liked, only I was in sich a tight fix, to keep you from givin' me away. You know yerself as you'd never 'a' let me cl'ar that thar camp, an' you with the chance to fetch Buck down on me."

"But I allowed as you'd be a-worretin', all alone by yerself; so I foterbed the kid along to keep ye company. An' ef you never snaked sich a catamount out of a sleepin' camp, you don't know the resk I run a-doin' of it."

This was puttin' a new face upon the matter, and Rose pondered it, as they sped away toward the northeast, with a tremulous hope of discovering that her situation was not so desperate as she had feared.

"Do you mean to say," she asked, "that you carried me off only so that you could get away yourself?"

"That's it, miss. An' ef you had been in my fix, I reckon you'd 'a' done the same."

"But you are now free. You can go your way, and my brother and I will wait here till our friends find us. Or, for that matter, we can easily follow the trail back, as soon as it is light."

"N—n—not just yet awhile, ef you please miss?"

"But why not? We can do you no further good. Besides, our friends will be less apt to follow you when we are back with them, than if we were still in your hands."

"I've thought o' that too. But I've got an

idea sence I sot out, what I reckon I'll carry through."

"What idea?"

"Waal, ye see, Bar'back Buck was a-playin' of his hand when he gobbled on to me, an' I didn't do no growlin'; an' now I'm a-playin' o' my hand sence I've euchered him an' he kin kick or not, jest as he likes. Ef he'd took me into Cap by the heels, he'd 'a' had the laugh ag'in' me; but ef he goes to Cap empty-handed, the laugh'll be ag'in' him. That's turn an' turn about, fair play the world over."

"But I don't wish to go with you!" cried Rose, trembling with sudden indignation at the thought of being used to bring chagrin upon Bareback Buck.

"I reckon I'll have to stand by that," said Black Bill, infusing a touch of dogged determination into his tone.

"What's the use?" cried Mart, angrily. "He's bound to put it through, and we can't help ourselves. But much he'll make by it!"

It was not what Bill would make, but what Buck would lose, that troubled Rose. Everybody would laugh at his having been outwitted. And to think that it was by such a brute! But, worst of all, she had brought this humiliation upon him.

Rose submitted, in bitterness of spirit.

Day dawned, but Black Bill stopped only long enough to water the horses, and to get out from the stores he had taken from Bareback Buck's supply some food which all three ate as they rode.

Thus far he had been shaping his general course by the stars, but as the increasing light brought out the scant landmarks of the prairie, he looked about searchingly, and finally, without explanation, turned almost at right angles, so as to go nearly due southeast.

The sun was an hour high when they reached and entered a stream, in the bed of which they had advanced scarcely twenty paces, when Bill uttered an ejaculation of surprise and gratification.

"Waal, waal!—that thar's made to my hand!" he exclaimed, and went off in a chuckle of satisfaction. "The boys has got in, have they? An' Cap's sent out a relief party. Hal ha! ha! They air right airy birds, but the worm is too spry fur 'em. Ef I ever meet that crowd, I'll stand 'em a fu'st-class treat—I will so."

Following his glance, Rose and Mart saw a trail of three horses leading up out of the stream to the southeast, though on the opposite side the soil was such that its descent was not visible.

As Black Bill kept on by this trail, the appearance was such that any one following his trail would naturally suppose that this was a continuation of it, and so be led astray.

Bill continued for a long distance in the stream and here and elsewhere Rose saw him take the same measures to blind their trail that Bareback Buck had employed, even to muffling the feet of the horses.

She did not see in this persistent effort to elude pursuit its real significance. She knew that Bareback Buck was better mounted than any other of the party, and she supposed that Bill was only anxious not to be overtaken before he reached the wagon-train.

But a feeling for Bareback Buck, which she persuaded herself, so far as she tried to analyze it, was a wish to make amends for having betrayed him into the power of his enemy, prompted her to try to circumvent the man who was making her the instrument of his own ambition.

At the point where Black Bill hoped for the greatest success, having blanketed the horses' hoofs with the nicest care, she dropped one of her ear-rings, hoping that the glint of the gold would catch the eye of the pursuer.

At another point a shred of ribbon served the same end.

Rose ventured another experiment—nothing less than to make it appear that her horse was doing his best, when in fact she was offering him every inducement to lag a trifle.

But Black Bill would have none of that.

"That won't do, miss," he remonstrated. "I know what's in these hyar hosses, an' it's got to come out, or I'll have to take it on myself—which the same I'd druther not—to fetch it out."

Chagrined at being detected, Rose yielded this point, the more readily since she did not wish to arouse Bill's suspicions, and set him to keeping a close watch upon her.

The northeasterly direction being resumed, all speed was made till, some time after noon, they came to the trail of the wagon-train.

Black Bill would have crossed it without appearing to notice it, but Mart pulled sharply up. "Why, look here!" he cried. "This is the trail of the wagon-train. We're going right across it."

"That's a wagon-train fast enough," replied Black Bill, "but it ain't Cap Collins's."

"What's the reason it ain't?" cried Mart, incredulously. "We passed over this very spot, in overtaking the train, and in coming back again."

"A heap you did!" scoffed Bill, with a careless laugh. "Youngster, before you've trailed

these hyar plains half as long as I have, you'll larn that perrarie sign looks all the same to a tenderfoot, an' now an' ag'in an old hand can't tell t'other from which, unless he's been over the ground half a dozen times.

"This hyar is Steve Carbury's trail, which the same he pulled out three days ahead o' Cap. We strike Cap's trail a good ten mile north o' hyar."

"No, we don't!" insisted Mart, "and if this is Steve Carbury's trail, as you say, or anybody else's trail, then Captain Collins followed it, and we followed it, too. You can't lose me when I've been over the same ground twice. What do I have eyes in my head for, if it isn't to take in things? And I've got one or two points down fine on this trail. Stand here and look to the west. Do you mean to tell me that I wouldn't know those three little dots of timber again, standing out from that long line like islands at the end of a point?"

With this beginning, he went on to give details which showed the accuracy of his observation, and soon convinced Black Bill that he had before him a boy with a sense of locality like that of an Indian.

There was no use in trying to fool him. But Bill cared nothing for that. He had the power to determine his actions, whatever his opinion, and that was all he cared for.

"You're a purty knowin' chap," he said, as soon as he could stem the rapid tide of Mart's proofs, "but you don't know enough to run me—not jest yet awhile, sonny!"

Rose could not recognize the landmarks which Mart pointed out to her so volubly. The prairie looked all alike to her. But she was glad of every excuse for delay, and would have questioned the rotundity of the earth, if Black Bill could have been induced to stand and debate the matter.

"Mart always knows about such things," she interposed. "And I think we might try this trail—a little way, at least. If we found we were mistaken, we could come back, and try your way."

"I reckon we'll try my way first," answered Black Bill, laughing at this palpable subterfuge.

"Look here!" cried Mart, with sudden heat. "You're fooling us, and you know it. Counting the days' journey Captain Collins was west of the place where we overtook the train, and the day and part of a night we put in between our last night's camp and the camp on Seven-mile Creek, we must have been pretty near due south of him. Instead of going toward his camp, then, you've brought us a day and the best part of a night to the north-east. That would fetch us out pretty near the ford across Seven-mile Creek, and that's the very spot we're on, this minute! If we were to go back over this trail, we'd strike the ford before sundown—I'll bet you anything you dare!"

Mart was so excited that he did not perceive the absurdity of this challenge. Indeed, it was only an expression of his confidence, in the correctness of what he maintained.

"Come! come!" was Black Bill's summary disposal of his array of facts and figures, "we've fooled away enough time over this. It's time we was goin'."

"You don't intend to take us to the wagon-train at all!" cried Mart, turning pale at the supposition of a different destination.

"Then we'll go whar I am 'lowin' to take ye to!" declared Bill.

"But we won't follow you any further!" exclaimed Rose, in terror.

"Ho! now ye're jokin'," laughed Bill.

And he turned upon her a smile that made her heart stand still.

There was a terrible pause, in which Rose debated with herself the question of tame submission, while Black Bill waited, with his eyes riveted on her face.

As if in answer to his mute challenge, she finally murmured, tremulously:

"We can't help ourselves."

"Waal, now, miss," said Bill, returning to his old tone of formal politeness, "you've got more hoss sense than any leetle woman I ever see, an' I've sized up a heap o' 'em."

Without more ado he turned his horse's head across the trail toward the northeast, and gave him a touch of the spur.

Rose followed mutely, with her head hanging on her breast, and tears starting in her eyes; Mart, with a groan.

"What are you going to do with us?" she finally summoned courage to ask, determined to know the worst at once.

"What be I 'lowin' to do with ye?" cried Black Bill, suddenly throwing off the mask he had thus far worn. "I'm 'lowin' to sell ye to the sheriff; that's my leetle game! An' a mighty fine price you'll fetch, too."

"Sell us to the sheriff!"

"Us!" scoffed Bill. "You! The kid ain't worth his salt, but you're a gold-mine!"

"But why not sell us to our friends?" urged Rose, with a sudden hope of a compromise.

"Friends be blowed!" growled Bill. "I'm a law an' order man, I be."

"It looks like it," cried Mart, wrathfully.

"Maybe you like them better as helps young-

sters to run away from their folks. But after I get you off my hands, I'll stand in with the sheriff, ef he says so, an' help to put Bar'back Buck in a stone jug."

As nothing was to be gained by arguing this point, Rose and Mart dropped the subject, and rode on, reflecting on their untoward fate and the vicissitudes they had passed through, only to end where they had set out.

But for poor Rose the situation was even worse. She had been shocked at Hal Rountree's treachery, without conceiving any particular personal dislike to him; but now she could not think of him without a shudder.

Then arose in her imagination the picture of another face, filling her heart with a strange sense of utter desolation, and flooding her eyes with tears.

So they rode on for the better half of the afternoon, when, of a sudden, without an instant's warning to any one, the fortunes of the day were entirely reversed.

Pressing the horses to their utmost speed, Black Bill had turned his head to remonstrate with Rose for not seconding his efforts, when his horse stepped into a burrow of some sort, and went crashing to the ground.

The ruffian made a desperate effort to fling his feet free from the stirrups, but one stuck fast, and he was tumbled sprawling over the animal's head.

A fall on the soft prairie loam was not such a serious matter, but as Bill struck the ground, one of the revolvers he had taken from Mart flew out of its holster, and went plowing the ground, end over end, some feet beyond him.

The second bound of Mart's horse after the accident brought him abreast with the revolver, and with a half insane yell of triumph he leaped to the ground, without stopping to pull up his horse, and caught up the weapon.

Black Bill lay at full length, with his hands stretched out beyond his head, at the greatest possible distance from his remaining revolver.

"Lie still!" shouted Mart, almost beside himself with excitement, as his blazing eyes showed. "You move a hair's breadth, and I'll bore you from the crown of your head to the soles of your feet!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

"A POLICEMAN'S LOT IS NOT A HAPPY ONE!" TIRED as he was, Rufe Haggerman did not sleep the night through.

Shadowy forms came skulking about. Now they would creep stealthily forward; now they would stop, and squatted on their haunches, lick their chaps as if in anticipation of a savory morsel; now they would skurry away, yelping with alarm—only to return again with augmented numbers.

Rufe was used to these sounds, and not fearing them when awake, they did not trouble him in his sleep.

But with increasing numbers they became bolder, making their first attack on the horse.

As they came snapping about, the animal would let fly his heels at them, snorting with alarm. Then he would rush at them with bared teeth, and shrill cries of rage.

In one of these rushes he tore up his tethering-pin, and being thus set at liberty, was free from further annoyance.

The coyotes then turned their attention to the sleeping man.

If there was a piece of meat anywhere about him that they could steal, he was likely to lose it, unless it was tied to him.

Presently one of them, bolder or with a keener appetite than the rest, made a snap at his boot, and tugged at it bravely.

With a yell Rufe rose to a sitting posture, and scattered the yelping and chattering crew with a shot from his revolver.

Once awake, his first thought was of his horse, and he looked, to discover that the animal was loose.

He got up and called to him, trying to approach and recover the tethering line.

But, no! His horsemanship, perhaps in view of his last day's toils, had no immediate use for his master. It was more agreeable to enjoy his liberty, for a little while at least.

Wheeling was useless; commands were thrown away. He kept just out of Rufe's reach with exasperating perversity.

If he had circled about the spot where he had passed the first part of the night, this might have had no particular result, beyond a more or less prolonged trial of Rufe's patience.

But instead of that, he careered away toward the south, taking Rufe away from his saddle, which lay, with its proper accouterments, where Rufe had slept.

You may believe that they had not gone far before Rufe was summoned back, by sounds the significance of which he knew only too well.

The coyotes, improving his absence, had attacked his saddle.

That they would make short work of it, if not interfered with, he needed no warning.

Yelling and firing his revolver to frighten them off, he rushed back; and it must be confessed that he added a spice of profanity when he discovered the condition of the saddle.

It was in tatters, the sharp teeth of the ravenous beasts having cut it like knives.

Rufe threw saddle and bridle over his shoulder, and set out afoot after his horse. That he was "mad," goes without saying; and that he blamed the horse for his misfortune much as he would have held a perverse fellow-man to account, was only human nature.

Tho way he coaxed that horse was a funny contrast with his internal rage. But the horse led him a fine dance, for an hour at least, to yield finally, and permit himself to be caught as docilely as if there were no such thing as retaliation.

Having regained possession, Rufe's manner underwent a very abrupt change for the worse, and he immediately entered upon a course of treatment calculated to shake the animal's future confidence in his professions of regard under similar circumstances.

But as that seems to be human nature too, we leave the very lively scene that ensued to the imagination of the reader.

Suffice it to say that, some minutes later, when both he and the horse were breathing hard, as if from violent exercise, he threw the saddle upon the animal's back, and strapped it to place with a vim!

"If you're so full of life, confound you!" he panted, "I'll git some benefit out of it."

Leaping into the saddle, he dug his spurs into the horse's quivering flanks till he made him scream with pain.

Then away they scoured to the southward, Rufe thinking only of "gittin' squar' with the ornery beast!"

It took him so long to get the value of the saddle out of the horse's hide, that when he was quite satisfied with his end of the bargain, the horse was reeking with sweat and trembling with exhaustion, and Rufe himself was feeling a great deal the worse for his ride.

More than this, he had no very clear motion as to the distance or direction he had come.

"Waal, I am one blame fool!" was his summing up of the situation, take it all around.

It was scarcely worth camping down for the hour or so that remained till daylight, but he was so beat out that he would have taken a rest if the sun had been an hour high.

"The question is," he said, holding self-communion when he was at last ready to resume his quest of the wagon-trail, "how fur have I come through that infernal quagmire an' in this tom-fol ride?"

After thinking over the deviousness of his yesterday's course, in which he might have ridden about as far in one direction as in another, he finally decided that the trail was still further to the south of him, and shaped his course accordingly.

He rode with a great deal of indecision, stopping frequently to gaze about him, and in one of these searches discovered a horseman creeping along the southwestern horizon.

This was a welcome sight, if indeed his vision was not at fault; for at such a distance it was the easiest thing in the world to confound one animal with another.

Eagerly he stood upright in the saddle, and shading his eyes scanned the moving object.

Yes, it was a horseman; and though at that distance he seemed to be moving at a snail's gait, he was in reality galloping at a good round pace toward the east.

With a shout of gratification, Rufe slipped back into the saddle, and spurred away to intercept the unknown.

As the distance shortened, he was perceived by the other, who changed his course to meet him, evidently as eager for companionship as he was.

Not long afterward Rufe swung his hat around his head, with a yell of laughter, which was responded to similarly by the other—no less a personage than Deadwood Dug.

"Dug," he shouted, as soon as he was within ear-shot—and his voice had a wide range!—"whar in Cain air we, anyhow?"

"That's jest what I'm wantin' to know," responded Dug.

"Have ye seen that thar trail anywhars?"

"Nary hide nor hair!"

"You hain't bred a famine in camp, then?"

"I've had famine, all I want, in the open, without breedin' nothin'! If you've got any coyote bait—ole boots, or ary thing else—I'll nibble at that."

"I hain't got nothin' else but coyote bait!" growled Rufe, producing what dried meat he had left. "I'd like to trade ye the lot of it fur a chaw o' terbacker."

"Hyar yo be, an' welcome."

While one satisfied the cravings of hunger, and the other drew solace for all of his trials from the weed, they recounted their experiences of the last twenty-four hours.

"The very dence was in it!" growled Rufe, but with comparative mildness of temper, since the sweet morsel between his teeth was filling every vein in his body with content. "I had as good a show as the best of ye, but fur that consarned quagmire."

"An' I'd 'a' scooped the deck, ef I'd only gone due south after cuttin' Ans'," urged Deadwood Dug, confidently.

"Waal, what's to do?" asked Rufe, preferring to give the conversation a practical turn.

"Thar ain't no use a-huntin' no trail south o' hyar," insisted Dug. "You crossed it while you was cuttin' the leather out o' that hoss o' yourn, sure's ye live."

"I reckon mebbe so," admitted Rufe. "Then it's to the north ag'in?"

"That's all we've got. I've come fur enough east, an' I know it fur a fact."

So to the north they rode, the more cheerily for the sweets of companionship, till they came across a trail clearly defined in the tall prairie grass, where the horses had swished through it.

"What's this hyar?" cried Rufe, as they approached the trail.

"Three hosses, an' goin' south-east," declared Dug, gathering this information from the lay of the grass, without seeing the actual tracks.

"How do ye read that sign, pard?"

"Mississip', or Ans', or both o' 'em, has got in, an' Cap has sent this hyar party to warn Ber'back Buck, an' to lend him a hand ef he wants it."

"That's jest me on the ground plan!"

"Waal, what's to do?"

"Is thar anything but one?"

"Take the back track to the train? You don't want to go back thar in this shape, Rufe."

"With my tail between my legs? You bet I don't! An' I reckon you don't, nuther."

"Not ef the court knows herself! Waal, then, it's a whack at Black Bill!"

"It's our only show, Dug. The boys'll kick at our turnin' up like two cold jacks, but bein's as we're thar, what kin they do?"

So, without more ceremony they wheeled into line with the trail, and followed it to the south-east.

The trail led down into a stream, but did not appear again on the other side.

"Waal, they're a quare lot," declared Rufe Haggerman, in bewilderment. "What call have they to blind their trail?"

"Look! Hyar she goes," cried Deadwood Dug, pointing to tracks up out of the water, a little further down, on the same side at which they had entered. "They only drove in to water, an' walked their hosses a piece to cl'ar that gully."

"That looks more like," said Rufe, and they rode up out of the water accordingly.

This was a very natural interpretation of the signs. Once in the stream at this point, it was easier to cross the mouth of the gully in the bed of the stream than to go out again and cross the gully itself.

And yet these appearances were altogether deceptive.

Rufe and Deadwood Dug had struck the trail, not of the men Cap Collins had sent out to Bareback Buck's assistance, but of Black Bill and his captives, and had fallen into the very error he had forecast.

So their luck played at cross-purposes. Setting out on the wrong trail, fortune shifted them to the right one, since it was the one they wished to follow; but being on the right trail, they were decidedly on the wrong one, since they would have given all they were worth to be back on the other, had they only known!

To learn what awaited them at the end of the trail, let us precede them in the company of Sam Carver, Blake o' Biles's, and a third, called Little John.

Setting out on the arrival of Mississip' and Ans' Matchin at the camp of the wagon-train, these men rode throughout the night and the better part of the next day, to reach the vicinity of Bareback Buck's camp on Seven-mile Creek.

Cap did not expect to find Buck here, knowing that they would be from sun to sun behind him. But it was a sure place to pick up his trail, while they might easily miss it if they took the chance of riding southward, in the expectation of being able to pick it up as they crossed it.

From this point, a trail of six would indicate to them that, with or without Black Bill's co-operation, the sheriff had not yet lifted Buck's blinds so far; while a trail of eight, or of nine, would show that, alone or assisted, the pursuer was yet on his track.

In the latter case they were not to spare horse-flesh, Cap undertaking to be personally responsible for any loss in this direction, and if it came to an open conflict—

Well, Cap said nothing!—and if you had looked into the eyes of the men who went on that enterprise, you would have thought that nothing was needed!

When they came in sight of the chaparral in the bend, they saw a horse grazing on the open prairie, to the eastward.

Instead of moving within a circumscribed limit, as a horse at the tethering-pin, he roamed at will, as one might do if hopped. But while they looked, he lifted and turned his head, as if listening, and then trotted off, too freely for the hopple, to the growth of timber north of the motte in the bend.

"Why, the critter's loose!" exclaimed Little John.

"He ain't nothin' else," declared Blake o' Biles's.

"It can't be Pard," said Sam Carver. "Them ain't his motions."

"Pard nothin'!" scoffed Blake o' Biles's. "You bet yer sweet life Bar'back Buck ain't a-pasierin' hyar at this time o' day."

"It must be the sheriff, then, or Black Bill."

"We'll mighty soon settle that."

"Hain't we better pick up the trail first? It can't be half a mile below hyar."

"I reckon thar ain't nothin' ag'in' that. Ef we find it cl'ar, we'll be all the easier spendin' the time to nose out the meanin' o' yan."

This suggestion being acted upon, they found the trail of six undisturbed.

"That makes that solid, anyway," declared Sam Carver.

And with a feeling of relief, they crossed the creek to investigate the presence of the strange horse.

What was their surprise to find, not one horse only, but two, one of which was saddled and bridled.

"Why, this hyar's Black Bill's hoss, as sure as shootin'!" cried Little John.

"An' ef that thar ain't the critter the sheriff straddled, I don't want a cent!" declared Sam Carver.

"Boys," said Blake o' Biles's, with a grave look, "we hain't got to the bottom o' this hyar yit."

"The trail o' six is all right, anyhow," insisted Sam Carver.

"Six hosses? Oh, yes! But who went away on 'em?"

That was a poser suggestive of serious possibilities.

"Suppose we take a look in that thar chaparral," suggested Little John.

"Look out that ye don't spile the sign, boys," cautioned Blake.

Being careful not to obliterate any marks that might be useful for re-examination, they went to the chaparral, and soon found traces of a struggle.

"I'll tell ye what's what," announced Blake o' Biles's, after having weighed all of the traces that seemed significant; "Bareback Buck has bagged Black Bill, body an' breeches!"

Then Sam Carver tossed his hat into the air—and such a shout as was sent up!

"Of course he has—of course he has! Why, it's as plain as the nose on yer face! What's Bill's hoss doin' out yan, all saddled an' bridled, an' fit fur to fight? Whoop! whoop! won't Cap smile when he gits this hyar?"

"But hol' on!" interposed Little John; "whar does the sheriff come in?"

"He's gobbled up the lot of 'em, I'll bet a hoss! I tell you, gents, Bar'back Buck's a mountain, when he cuts loose!"

Blake o' Biles's rubbed his nose, and still looked reflective.

"He's got Bill fast enough," he repeated, "but we hain't ketch'd on to the sheriff yit. He never comes hyar bar'back an' Buck never carted off his fixin's, an' left Bill's."

"Now, what fur did he cl'ar out an' leave Bill's hoss a-standin' to a hitchin'-post? That's the question, gents. Do you drop? He 'lowed as the sheriff was back o' Black Bill, an' don't ye furgit it!"

"What fur does he hitch on to Bill an' walk him off Spanish, an' run from the sheriff? A man's a man, an' Buck ain't afeard o' nothin' on two legs. Why, he kin put Bill in the bag, an' that's all thar is to it; but it's his leetle game not to let no sheriff clap eyes onto the leetle gal. Thar ye have it, gents, right off the reel."

"But whar does the sheriff come in?" insisted Little John. "Thar's his hoss, as big as a mountain."

"We'll go an' ask the hoss," answered Blake.

They went back to where Black Bill's horse was tied, and taking his trail from the spot, followed it back.

Carver suggested that the sheriff's horse be caught, but Blake objected:

"We hain't got no use fur none sich. Let him hunt his own hoss."

So, following the trail back, they found that the sheriff's horse had followed Black Bill's.

Of course the trail led them to where Black Bill had left the victims of his "doctored" whisky.

Both of them had slept till well toward noon. Then Jake fog had shaken off the stupor that oppressed him.

Words are poor to depict his rage, when he found that he had been taken in by Black Bill, in spite of his caution.

But steel hand-cuffs are insensible to profanity, as none knew better than Jake Fogg, having heard others experiment in this matter. So, giving over this futile expenditure of vitality, he rolled over and over, till he was in position to kick Lish Losy into senility to his surroundings.

But Lish could not help him, being helpless himself, and the furious sheriff had the chagrin to see no road to deliverance short of gnawing Lish's bonds in twain with his teeth.

To say that he took to this task reluctantly, would be to "draw it exceedingly mild."

As for Lish, it must be confessed that, in the midst of his trouble, he had enough of the old Adam in him to derive some little consolation from the sheriff's sore plight.

"I'd never got squar' with him no other way," he said afterward, to "Mirandy."

Jake Fogg took to his task with so little relish, and with intervals so many and so long spent in futile execration of every one concerned in this affair, including the two Rountrees and himself, that the party from the wagon-train came upon him with the work yet unaccomplished, though with a prospect that Lish would have his hands freed by nightfall.

"Waal, I swar!" laughed Sam Carver, at sight of the pair. "This hyar knocks me!"

"Who put you in this hyar shape?" asked Blake o' Biles's, looking down at them sedately.

"Instead o' quizzin' us thar, suppose you give us a lift out o' this, first," suggested the sheriff, struggling with the oaths that stuck in his throat.

"Waal, that jest depends," answered Blake, in a deliberative tone. "You seem to be doin' well."

"An' do you mean to leave me to gnaw them blanket-strips through, when you kin finish 'em with a slash o' yer knife?" cried Jake, choking so that he could scarcely pronounce the words.

"That ain't none o' my funeral," retorted Blake. "I didn't do the job, an' I ain't a-undoin' nothin' what don't belong to me. Ef you don't want to cut 'em, let 'em alone."

"Gentlemen," said the sheriff, in a subdued tone, turning to the others, "you ain't leavin' us in no sich fix as this?"

"You're a dirty lot—I will say that," answered Sam Carver, as if this were quite a concession, an' I reckon I might as well wash my hands of ye before I take holt, as afterward."

"But you, sir!" pleaded Jake of Little John.

"I'd see you hanged first!" was his summary disposal of the matter.

"Waal!" roared the sheriff, "blast my two eyes into one ef I don't hope to see the lot o' you hung, an' I wouldn't see nothin' better'n the chance to cut the drop myself!"

"An' you, with them hard feelin's ag'in' us, was askin' us a favor!" laughed Sam Carver. "Come on, pard! This hyar chap'll spile our manners."

Whereupon they rode away, leaving the sheriff to his dudgeon, and the unsavory task of gnawing horse-blankets.

Puzzled to know how it was that the sheriff and his companion came to be in such a plight, but believing that Black Bill, if not Bareback Buck, could unravel the mystery, they returned and took possession of Bill's horse.

So this was the situation upon which Rufe Haggerman and Deadwood Dug descended.

They were so taken with the account of their comrades that they insisted on having a look at the two disconsolates.

They were as implacable as the others, and only ruffled the sheriff's temper the more.

"Ef you've got any more o' that infernal wagon-train!" he roared after them, as they went away laughing, "jest send them on, an' I'll do my best to shoot some of 'em the minute I kin handle a revolver!"

"Shoot the hand-cuffs!" Rufe laughed back at him; and that was the last he heard or saw of them.

They returned to the chaparral, where they all concluded to camp for the night, and rest themselves and their weary horses, inasmuch as there was now no cause for serious concern, but they had scarcely settled themselves, when they witnessed a spectacle that sent the blood back upon their hearts with a thrill of direful apprehension.

CHAPTER XXV.

BAREBACK BUCK'S WILD RIDE.

THE three remaining in the lone prairie camp slept on till the gray of the morning, when 'Bijah started up and gazed about him.

His first thought was always of Rose, and a glance showed him that she was no longer in her hammock.

"Waal, she's stole a march on us this time, sure," he said to himself. "I've been uncommon sleepy, an' that's a fact."

He got up and stretched himself, rubbing his eyes to dissipate the lingerings of drowsiness.

Pard lifted his head, and Bareback Buck started up as if the movement electrified him.

He was one of those who spring from profound sleep into complete wakefulness, picking up the thread of conscious existence just where it was broken off.

"What! Is it morning?" he cried. "An' is it possible that Cass has let me sleep through my watch? What a donder-head I must be! I'll take him to task for this."

"And Miss Rose! She is up and out already! And I have slept through it all!"

He looked about for Rose as he started to go to Cass's post.

His glance was a careless one, and he thought nothing of its not happening to light upon her, till he found Cass fast asleep on his post.

Then with an electric thrill he sprung forward, and seizing the boy roughly by the shoulder, shouted:

"Cass! Cass! wake up! In the name of heaven, what's the meanin' o' this?"

While Cass staggered to his feet, in terror and bewilderment, a cry came from back in the chaparral.

"The prisoner! Whar's Black Bill?"

And 'Bijah came running toward the other two.

"The prisoner! Black Bill!" repeated Bareback Buck, and he plunged back into the chaparral.

But he was not looking for Bill. All in a flush he realized that some terrible calamity had befallen them all, and beside himself with dread, he rushed about, shouting:

"Rose! Rose! God in heaven, what has become of her?"

Cass was at his heels, and he discovered that Mart and three of the horses also had disappeared.

The motte was so small that all this could be definitely determined at a glance. Then they stood and stared into one another's faces.

"He has made off with them both!" burst forth Bareback Buck, at last, with an anguish in his voice and in the expression of his eyes that could not be put into words. "Come! come! there is no time to lose. Follow me as fast as you can."

And without stopping for any one or any thing, he leaped upon Pard's back, and with shouts that goaded the horse to his wildest exertions, dashed along the trail of the abductor.

Cass and 'Bijah stood and stared after him, for a moment paralyzed with astonishment.

Never had they seen anything like this. The horse's belly seemed almost to graze the tops of the prairie grass, while his legs swung back and forth under him like the pistons of a runaway locomotive. So he cleft space like a thunderbolt!

"But what are we standing here for, doing nothing?" cried Cass, recovering himself. "Oh, 'Bijah! that villain has got her, and he'll kill her as sure as the world! And all because I slept! Oh! oh! oh!"

"No, thar ain't no danger o' that," responded 'Bijah, answering Cass's, direful prognostic. "He was after her from the first, to take her back to Jake Fogg. That's the worst we've got to be afeard of."

"But that is almost as bad. Jim Rountree's jackal shall never carry her back to his master, if I have to shoot him with my own hand! Come on! We haven't a minute to lose."

There was no need to urge 'Bijah. He was already as active as Cass himself.

In a twinkling the horses were saddled, bridled and mounted, and without stopping for breakfast, or indeed thinking of such a thing as hunger, the two dashed away after Bareback Buck, already far away toward the horizon.

Such a ride was never ridden before. Away! away! on the wings of the wind!—his teeth set, his eyes blazing, his face as white as death!

From the time he left Cass and 'Bijah, he never uttered a sound save to urge his horse to greater speed.

And how nobly did that unrivaled steed respond to his call! He had eclipsed all competitors before, but now he was annihilating space and time! He seemed to realize that this was the emergency of his life. Now, if ever, he could serve his master, his friend, his comrade, well!

His head was stretched out in a line with his neck; his ears lay flat; his eyes blazed; his blood-red nostrils dilated and quivered.

Soon his sleek hide began to glisten, then to foam where his rider's legs chafed it. Froth appeared on his lips, then flew back in snow-white flecks on his breast.

On! on! on!—without pause, without halting, without abatement!

A gully was cleared at a bound. It was but a little higher rise in the swift undulations.

A leap from the bank of a stream as far out as his tremendous impetus would carry him; a splash a churning of the waters to a foam; a mad scramble up the opposite side; then away again as if there had been no break!

Into the glory of the morning he plunged, and on, and on, while the sun slowly climbed to the meridian.

Man and horse, as if actuated by one will, looked only to the eastward, seemed insensible to fatigue, to everything save the unseen goal.

Who can tell the thoughts of the rider in that mad race? They were of lost love, of a shattered dream, of inviolable revenge!

He had told Black Bill that, in all the vicissitudes of his wild life, he had escaped the direful burden of human blood, but woe to the abductor if he fell into his hands now!

Reaching the point where Rufe Haggerman and Deadwood Dug had turned into the trail, it was natural that he should suppose that Jake Fogg and Lish Losy had been following their captive confederate, to join him there.

At the stream where Bill blinded his trail, it was also natural that he should fall into the same error that led Rufe and Dug off upon the different trail.

Believing that he was following three desperate men, he never thought of checking his pursuit, to wait for the support of Cass and 'Bijah. No! alone and single-handed he was ready to meet them, and let the best man win!

On his trusty Pard he could ride like a Pawnee brave, and his magazine rifle should do the rest.

On! on! with the westering sun in his back! No pause, no rest, till he had brought the abductor to bay.

And this was the spectacle that thrilled the men at the chaparral in the bend with a dread of calamity.

"Bar'back Buck?" went up the cry. "Boys, he's as white as death! Somethin's wrong, as sure as shootin'!"

"What's he comin' hyar fur? He can't be after the sheriff, or Ole Hay-seed!"

"He's after help—that's what he's after. He's struck our trail, an' dropped to our bein' from the train."

"Then we don't want to keep him a-waitin'. Into the saddle, boys!"

They flung the saddles upon their horses in hot haste, and plunged into the stream as soon as they were mounted. Yet they scarcely reached the other side before Bareback Buck was down upon them.

"What's the row, Buck? Whar's the leetle—"

"Whar air they? How long have you been hyar? Have they passed you?"

"Who, Buck?—who?"

"Black Bill and the sheriff. They've got Miss Rose and her younger brother. I've trailed 'em right down hyar. Don't stop, gentlemen. We can talk as we go along. I can see that they have given you the slip."

"But, hold on, Buck. We've got Black Bill's hoss, but we hain't seen hide nor hair o' Bill himself. The—"

"The horse is of no consequence. We left him hyar night before last. It's the man I'm after, an' he has three of our best hosses. Gentlemen, if you don't know whar he is, please don't knock all the sign that's the only thing we've got to go by."

"But the sheriff, Buck—we've got him fast enough. He's—"

"You have the sheriff? Where—where?"

"He's hopped in his own irons, about three mile back."

"An' Ole Hay-seed is with him. But, Buck, you can't 'a' been trailin' them, fur their hosses is runnin' loose, an' the sheriff has been gnawin' on Ole Hay-seed's tie-up fur a good twenty-four hours, at any rate."

"What do you mean?" cried Buck.

And he listened in astonishment while the situation of his enemies was detailed to him.

"Waal," he insisted, at its conclusion, "whether they are with him or not, Black Bill has passed hyar with his prisoners within three hours. He can't be more than that ahead of me, even if he got away the first thing last night. And I have been joined by two others of some kind. I took it for granted that it was the sheriff and his companion. Hyar air the sign, gentlemen. I can't be out on that. I haven't lost sight of it a step of the way between hyar and our camp."

"Hold on, Buck," cried Rufe Haggerman, as a new idea struck him. "Is this hyar the trail what you've been follerin'?"

"Yes."

"A trail o' five—three, with two joinin' in about a mile an' a half on the t'other side of a creek with a gully comin' into it on the right?"

"Certainly. The three were Black Bill and his prisoners, and I supposed, of course, that the other two were the sheriff and his backer."

"Not much! Them two was Dug an' me; an' this hyar is the trail of the rest o' this crowd."

This led to a very animated discussion, out of which the truth finally emerged.

"Sold!" cried Bareback Buck, as it dawned upon him. "An' that hound has a good day's start!"

This was a hopeless prospect, and for the first time Bareback Buck showed signs of breaking down.

He looked at his horse. Even Pard's magnificent powers had been exhausted. Nothing in the shape of flesh and blood could endure such a strain and not succumb to it.

While under the excitement of that wild race he had not shown how far his energies were really spent, but now that he thought that his task was accomplished, he drooped.

He hung close to his master, rubbing Buck's arm feebly with his frothy muzzle, in token of affection.

If actions could speak, these said:

"I have brought you here as no other friend could have done. You don't know how glad I am to have been able to serve you in your extremity. We're played out together now, pard, but I'll do as much again for you any time you like."

Indeed, Bareback Buck himself was well-nigh exhausted. Neither food nor water had passed his lips in that day of absorbing anxiety. He did not even now think of hunger, though he realized his weakness.

But this was no time for human or equine weakness. He must on! on! No rest while his love was exposed to an unknown fate!

"Boys," he said, taking the hands of those nearest, "I rely upon your friendship now, if you ever want to show it to me."

"Try us, Buck, in any way you like."

"Black Bill can have only one use for his captive—to sell her to the sheriff. Then, while I am after Bill himself, I want you to dog the sheriff, but keeps shady, so as not to scare Bill off, if he keep out of my reach, or gits away with me. He may do that, ye know; but I want this thing to go through, whether I am dead or alive. Then, when Bill makes overtures to the sheriff, I want you to be on hand, and to git the young lady back, no matter at what cost. Take her to Cap. Cap'll look out fur her, ag'in' all sheriffs in this byar country!"

"We'll do it, Buck."

"Won't we, though! An' you bet we won't stand on trifles!"

The looks that indorsed this promise were good evidence that it could be relied on.

"Remember, boys," Buck concluded, "though this has the look o' law on the sheriff's side, it's the most infamous outrage that was ever perpetrated."

Buck spoke warmly. He was an interested party!

"It don't make no manner o' difference what side the law's on," declared Blake o' Biles's, with his wonted coolness. "Thar ain't no two-legged sheriff goin' to make the leetle lady do what she don't want to, ef we once git a sight of her."

"And now," said Buck, "has any man among you got any whisky?"

"Whisky? Whew! I 'lowed you was a teetotler, Buck."

"So I am," replied Buck. "I know that whisky-drinkin' never did any man any good, an' so I let it alone. But I ain't a fanatic. I know that it has its use, like everything else. If I was in the habit of drinkin', it wouldn't do me any good now; but as neither I nor Pard is in the habit of drinkin' the stuff, it's just the thing to carry us over a crisis."

"Waal, thar's hoss-sense in that, I'll swar!" ejaculated Little John. "I never looked at it in that light before. I've took my bitters pooty stiddy ever sence I kin remember, an' come to think, it do take a pooty middlin' dose ef I want to git up an extra allowance o' steam. But hyar's my canteen. I 'low I kin git along on terbacker tell we git whar we kin lay in another stock o' corn-juice."

The others contributed their quota, and having poured a pretty stiff "horn" down Pard's throat—much against his will, be it said!—Buck braced himself up with a "dose" suitable for a man of temperate habits.

The rest he retained for future use, adding to it a supply of food.

The effect upon man and beast was immediately apparent. Pard's relaxed muscles grew tense again, and his eye flashed with its wonted fire. He was ready for a renewal of the race.

"This," said Buck, as he felt his veins warming and his nerves tingling with returning vigor, "is the true use of liquor. Here is an emergency on which we can afford to squander our reserves of strength, and this enables us to draw upon them. We can make up the waste at some future time."

"And now, boys, God only knows what may lie between this and the next time I meet you. I can't thank you now—"

"Don't waste no time on that, Buck! Go along, ole man, an' good luck go with ye!"

They grasped his hands all round. Then into the saddle, and away! He must make the most of every glint of sunlight. It was more precious than gold to him.

Away! away! away! How they skimmed the prairie!

The men gazed after him in wondering admiration.

"That," said Sam Carver, "is a lightnin' hoss!"

"An' a lightnin' man!" added Blake o' Biles's. Then they turned back, to see that Black Bill did not "make connections" with the sheriff.

Bareback Buck rode back as he had come, with not perceptibly abated speed.

Cass and 'Bijah had followed him faithfully, never suspecting the shifting of trails, and he met them about half-way between that point and the chaparral in the bend of Seven-mile Creek.

Though their horses were well-nigh spent, they spurred forward to meet him, supposing that he was returning to urge them to greater expedition.

When he told them that they were all on the wrong track, Cass was disheartened.

"We'll never see her again!" he cried, in a tone which showed that his physical exhaustions was telling upon his fortitude. "Mart's gone, too! I suppose he'll kill him, to get him out of his way, if he hasn't done it already!"

"Keep up your courage, Cass," admonished Bareback Buck. "It ain't so bad as that, though it's bad enough, Heaven knows! But Black Bill ain't killin' anybody, if he kin help it."

"But let's not waste any time now. We haven't more than an hour before sunset—"

"And that will finish us, while he'll keep going on!" groaned Cass.

"No, it won't. I'll go on ahead, because I kin make better time than you fellows. You follow as long as it's light, and then you'll see a fire to guide you further. By the time you reach that fire, I'll be on ahead, following the trail with a light, partly afoot and partly ahorseback. That will give you your chance to come up with me again, guided by the fires I'll leave. Keep a stiff upper lip! We'll down Black Bill yet!"

With that he was away again.

"If we only had horses like that!" groaned Cass. "He's been clear to our camp on Seven-mile Creek! He's covered twice the ground we have to-day, and he runs away from us as if he was right fresh, and we played out as we are."

"Ef we only had Skit an' Seat," sighed 'Bijah, "an' that black hearted varlet he had these hyar, we'd be a heap better off."

Long before sunset they lost sight of Bareback Buck, but when the dusk came down around them so that they could not see the trail, a gleam of light, far away on the northwestern horizon, made it no longer necessary to pick their way by it.

Bareback Buck had set fire to the prairie-grass.

A prairie fire is not necessarily a dangerous thing. Everything depends upon the luxuriance and dryness of the grass, and the height and direction of the wind, though with a favorable condition of the combustible material an extended fire will soon cause sufficient atmospheric disturbance to fan it to fury.

There was no such danger now, and on coming up with the fire Buck had started, Cass and 'Bijah easily rode around it.

For some time they kept on in the same general direction, having nothing to guide them, but presently another fire started up, giving them exact bearings.

In this way they followed Buck, but so rapidly did he work that, in spite of the advantage of continuous riding, while he had to hunt the trail at intervals on foot, they were a long time in overtaking him.

And they had a chance to see his method.

He would leap to the ground, strike a light, hunt the trail, fire the grass, mount again, and ride on for some distance, then correct his deviation from the trail as before, and ride on again.

"Now, boys," he cried, as they came up, "we can all work at this, an' many hands make light work. You kin keep pretty near the trail most o' the time by sightin' back over your last two markers. Drive ahead boldly. If one don't pick it up, another will. An' the minute thar's a new marker, don't fool away time huntin' for any particular spot. Dust on ahead, and strike out a new lead."

This competitive work revived their energies wonderfully, even the horses plucking up spirit with the excitement of this hurry-skurry mounting and dismounting, the cries of their masters to one another, and the flare of the fires.

Sometimes one was ahead, and sometimes another; but Buck managed to keep the boys doing much more continuous riding than he did.

With no help of a stirrup, he was quicker on and off his horse, and quicker at finding the trail, besides that his horse outsped theirs.

It was nine o'clock when they reached the point where they had lost Black Bill's trail.

"Now," said Buck, "thar's no use wastin' time whar the bank couldn't be mounted without leavin' a clear trail. Bill never left no sign out o' this river—you may bet your life on that! This is whar he counted on losin' us. But look out for every spot whar a blanketed hoof could be set down safely."

They went to work with a will, and at every place where it was possible for Bill to have left the stream, they examined the ground on hands and knees.

It was 'Bijah who found the trail anew, his eye catching the glint of Rose's ear-ring.

Such a shout as went up at this discovery!

"We're dead sure—that's the beauty of it!" cried Buck, "an' from this out we kin look for help from her when we strike the toughest nuts. Boys, we'll pick Black Bill up yet, an' drop him hard! She's a trump, if thar ever was one!"

Then away again, till in the gray of the morning they reached the trail of the wagon-train.

There Cass made a discovery. His sharp eyes detected something fluttering in the morning breeze, like a little flag used for deer-stalking.

Buck with his superior mount was the first to reach it.

The boys, as they bobbled forward on their staggering horses, saw him snatch the signal, whatever it was, from the slender staff that bore it, gaze at it intently, as if reading something, and then, with a yell of triumph, fall to kissing it madly.

When they came up and discovered what it was, they held a sort of powwow over the little object; and then Cass, completely exhausted, and unnerved by the alternations of emotion through which he had passed, flung himself on the ground and burst into tears.

They were tears that did him no dishonor. The manliest men have shed them on occasion.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MART MAKES THE TEN-STRIKE.

BLACK BILL had lived where a decided command generally means "business," but it is probable that he had not often heard anything quite so truculent as Mart's order to lie still.

Without drawing his hands toward him, he lifted his head, and looked straight into the barrel of a revolver held within about six feet of his eye.

"Drap that, youngster!" he roared, with a scowl intended to cow the boy into obedience.

"Not if I know myself!" cried Mart, not even "jumping."

"I'll cut the heart out o' your body when I git a-bolt o' you!"

"When you do! It'll be a long time, mister! A little while ago you said I didn't know enough to run you, but I know enough to know when you're down, and to keep you down when I've got you there."

"Let up, I say, an' I'll go easy on ye."

"Thank you for nothing! When you get the chance to go on me either one way or the other, just let me know, will you?"

"Do ye want me to make a break fur you? Come out o' that!"

"I want to see you try!"

Mart laughed gleefully. Not that he felt particularly cheerful. In fact, he was nearly "scared out of his boots."

To talk about shooting a man, is one thing; but the idea of actually carrying it out made Mart's blood run cold. At the same time, there is no doubt that in this emergency he would have done it. At any rate, Black Bill, who thought that he could read a man's eye, was convinced that he would.

Rose was terrified beyond expression. In imagination she saw the enraged ruffian driving his bowie-knife into her brother's heart.

"Oh, Mart! Mart!" she cried, reining in her horse, yet at a loss what to do.

"We've got him, Rose! Don't you be afraid."

"But what can we do? You mustn't shoot him! Don't, Mart—oh, don't!"

"Well, I should like to know if I won't!" cried Mart, with a certainly dangerous lighting of the eye. "Do you suppose I'm going to let him ever get another chance at me? I'll make coyote bait of him if he tries to come any tricks on me, and he knows it."

"Oh, say now!" protested Bill, affecting to laugh, "this hyar's gone fur enough. I was only tryin' to skeer you, youngster. Ye don't 'low as I'd do ye any real hurt, do ye?"

"If you'll excuse me, I believe you would—if you got the chance. Lie still there, or I'll bore you as sure as you're a living man!"

Black Bill had affected to assume a more comfortable position—a position that, if carried a little further, would give him a chance to snatch at his remaining revolver.

But, persuaded of Mart's vigilance by his summary challenge, he dropped back into place with a suppressed oath.

"Now, Rose," said her brother, "I want you to get off of that horse and come here."

"What for? What are you going to do?" asked Rose, hesitating.

"Why, we can't get away from here till we have taken that other revolver away from his Honor—with his permission. There's only one way to do that. You must take it from his belt while I hold him under fire."

Then Rose Crawford showed what sort of stuff she was made of. Her fear had been for her brother, not for herself. Now, seeing what was required of her, she instantly leaped from the saddle.

"Now, Mr. Man," said Mart, "I have only one thing further to say. When you hear from me again, it will be short and sharp, and will put you out of your misery mighty quick. It all rests with you. If you're the sensible fellow I take you to be, you won't make it necessary for me to speak."

Keeping at about the same distance, beyond the possible sweep of his arm, Mart slowly edged around the fallen ruffian, till he stood almost at his feet.

Black Bill scowled at Rose like a demon.

"Don't you dar' to touch that thar weepin'" he commanded.

Rose turned very pale, but she looked determined to carry out her brother's purpose, nevertheless.

"As a last word," continued Mart, "I'll trouble you not to turn your head. On second thought, I'll make assurance doubly sure, by requesting you to lie with your face fairly on the ground. You may believe that I don't propose to take any chances of my sister's safety, and therefore I shall shoot you at the slightest suspicious move. If I make a mistake, it won't be in your favor."

With a savage oath Black Bill complied with these directions, and then Rose drew cautiously near.

She had to step so that her foot was nearly in contact with Black Bill's leg; and in bending to reach the weapon, she had to bring her head almost in range of the cocked revolver in Mart's hand. Much now depended upon his steadiness of nerve, if startled by a quick spring on the part of their enemy.

But Rose did not think of herself. The hazard must be incurred, and she went at it resolutely. Here was the courage that makes a border-man's wife a successful defender of her children. She stepped so lightly that Black Bill did not know when her hand hovered over the butt of the revolver.

A deft clutch, a quick tug, and she had it! "Hurrah!" shouted Mart, in wild exultation. "Now we're masters of the situation! However, I'll trouble you to lie still there a moment longer."

He backed away to fair pistol-range; then said to his sister:

"Now, Rose, fetch your horse around here, and mount from my knee."

This maneuver was successfully carried out. Then Mart got into the saddle himself, and secured the remaining horse.

"Air you 'lowin' to leave me afoot on the prairie?" demanded Black Bill.

"I'm 'lowin'," answered Mart, mimicking him, "to take back our own property. If that leaves you afoot, it is the result of your own dishonesty. You'll have to look out for that yourself. Good-by! When you get a bid from Jake Fogg for my sister, drop me a postal card with the amount."

With that they rode away, leaving their enemy swearing lustily, but to no practical purpose.

When they were diminishing in the distance, it occurred to him that Bareback Buck might happen along that way, and he had so little relish for such a meeting that he set out at a run toward the north, to plunge into the swampy lands where Rufe Haggerman had passed so uncomfortable a day. And this was the last seen of Black Bill by any of the persons concerned in the struggle now drawing happily to a close.

Following their trail back, Rose and Mart reached the trail of the wagon-train, where arose the question whether they should keep on back, in the hope of meeting the others of their party, or set out along the trail of the wagon-train to overtake Cap Collins.

With a thought of a certain plainsman whom on the day before she had charged with want of feeling, Rose voted that they keep on retracing their trail, but Mart urged that they were as likely to meet Jake Fogg and their guardian as anybody else.

So Rose pinned her handkerchief to a twig, which Mart cut in a neighboring chaparral, and added to this signal-flag a scrap of paper, announcing their escape and destination.

This was the trophy which Bareback Buck secured on the following morning, and though Cass and 'Bijah were fairly unable to proceed without some rest, he resolved to try to overtake the writer and guard her on the rest of her way to the wagon-train.

This he did not succeed in doing. Pard was unrivaled, but even he had his limits.

When Buck reached the wagon-train, Rose was in bed in one of the wagons, safe in the care of the Mrs. Chester, whose kindness Cap Collins had commended, but prostrated with the reaction which followed her long excitement and severe physical strain.

Mart? Well, you should have seen him! He was playing the grand sultan among the ladies, the hero of the occasion.

The boys who were to follow the sheriff were recalled, and the wagon-train went on its way, Cap Collins declaring that he would tar and feather any sheriff who dared to show his nose about there, and everybody vowing to support him in it.

But there was no occasion. Jake Fogg knew when he was "down."

In the Far West sister Beth was found, and there was no more chance for "gardeens" of Jim Rountree's appointment.

Jake Fogg swore that his defeat was due to fool's luck.

Hal Rountree laughed, and said that the best man had won.

Bareback Buck agrees with Hal, for he claims Bowie-Knife 'Bijah as his pard, and a stanch pard he makes, too.

'Bijah gave back Rose's ear-ring, but Buck kept the handkerchief.

However, on the principle that exchange is no robbery, perhaps, he gave her a finger-ring in the place of it, and she seemed quite content; but of course Jim Rountree and "Mirandy" are the bitterest of all.

THE END.

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